Case Study: White Night Melbourne in 2013 and 2014
Disruption or Contribution Toward the Socially Engaged Public (Art)?

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Abstract
The purpose of this case study is to analyze the White Night arts festival as a form of public art using the frameworks of art as experience, art practice as cooperation and social objects. In 2013, Melbourne hosted more than 300,000 participants at its first White Night and in 2014 the number increased to 550,000. [1] The White Night started in Paris, 2002 influenced by the origin of Nuit Blanche, and is now held in more than 23 cities globally. [2] The various White Night events share a common objective, which is to celebrate and transform the city, as art and entertainment [3], into a free cultural event. The White Night festival features traditional and new media art in public spaces that promote social interaction and participation amongst large public groups. Three artworks are discussed as case studies using the conceptual frameworks to highlight the potential of the festival to build socially engaging and interactive public artworks. The case studies also reveal areas of focus that are unique to the festival, which could be leveraged to greater effect.

Keywords
Public Space, Public Art, White Night Melbourne, New Media Art, Social Objects, Audience Interaction, Participation, Cooperation, Co-creativity, Socially Engaged Art

Introduction
In 2013 and 2014 the White Night transformed part of the urban public environment in Melbourne, Australia into a cultural playground. Audience interaction and participation are significant components of the festival, and it brings digital media art projects directly into public view. Although the festival has a growing number of visitors and meaningful goals, it also raises questions of how the audience perceives the event and its larger influence on the urban environment in the city. Observers have viewed it as both a public disruption and contribution, suggesting lessons that can be learnt from the festival for exploring how digital media can provide a socially engaging and interactive experience for its audience.

As well as increased attendance, from 2013 to 2014 the White Night festival saw increased facilities for visitors and larger, more diverse area of involvement including the city center, railway stations, galleries, museums and lane-ways.

The White Night represents a growing international development that has brought public art to large audiences. The festival brings a concentrated collection of artworks and a unique scale of public involvement, making it a valuable event to analyze for its approach to public art. In this study the White Night is considered using established frameworks for interpreting public art projects, to find lessons that can be taken from the festival and also provide criticisms that can be used to develop it with increased social engagement and interactivity.

Methodology
Participatory new media installations in public spaces struggle in the intersection of political, cultural, social, educational, entertainment and economic fields. The fields have different operational logic and techniques that impose different demands for audience participation so the desired outcomes of public art in urban environments are diverse and sometimes conflicting.

This study is less concerned with political, educational and market aspects of the public art experience and focuses instead on experimental practices in new media participatory public art that has greater potential to build social interaction and participation. Art as experience, artifacts as social objects and art practice as cooperation are concepts that are relevant to the White Night festival and point to a discussion on how to develop socially engaged and interactive art practice. The concept of co-creativity forms the basis of an extension of this discussion.

Art as a tool for social transformation is not a new concept. It has a long history from religious paintings to new media participatory public art. However, recently the term ‘socially engaged art’ has arisen in many academic seminars and public discussions about contemporary art practices that focus on site-specificity [4], ‘new genre public art’ [5], participation [6], community [4, 5] and audience interaction, experience and cooperation. [7, 8]

The definition of ‘socially engaged art’ is ever evolving and has different connotations depending on context. This paper focuses on the underexplored potential that engaging the wider public as co-creators of interactive digital
experiences has to act as a catalyst for social awareness and change through positive experiences of cooperation.

**Conceptual Frameworks**

Social spaces can be defined by their physical properties, but also by conceptual properties. Public parks, shops, social networking sites and online games have their own social functions. Henri Lefebvre argues that space requires human social interaction and a cultural dimension of represented space. He states that all “space is social” and emphasizes the designing and planning of social space through the use of a ‘social object’, stating that “social space has thus always been a social product.”[9]

Jyri Engestrom defines ‘social objects’, a concept he framed in 2005, as “the objects that mediate the ties between people” in the context of social networks and argued its fundamental basis to spark social interactions and build connections between users, leading to the success of the social network. [9] Karin Knorr Cetina had elaborated the concept more generally as ‘Objectual Practice’ four years earlier. [10]

This framework has been applied in different environments, such as the development of the iPhone, marketing and games. Nina Simon also applied it to museums. [11] These applications focus on elevating social objects as strong connections that bind people together, a connection of having something in common and new. These cases are based on social objects outside the social media paradigm.

Social objects can be everyday objects used in art or public works that result in human-human interactions. When a baby or animal is the centerpiece of a new interaction on the street, the baby or animal can be considered as social objects that play the role of promoting a new connection between people in a public environment.

One of the main objectives of the White Night festival is [re]connectivity between audiences through engaging in and with public environments such as Figure2. Dance Now. If an audience can identify new art objects that are social, transformative and playful in the White Night event it could lead to increased social interaction and participation, building a ‘we-together’ concept between social objects and audiences.

The concept of art as experience considers the way the viewer experiences the physical surroundings and other people when viewing art. The experience will differ from viewing the art alone at home, in an exhibitions or museums. The environment plays an important factor in facilitating active engagement, interaction and participation. By encouraging social engagement through artworks that require the audiences to interact with each other, a deeper experience can be created that is more dynamic and playful. [12]

The concept of co-creativity in art process and design is to have creative inputs from multiple individuals with shared goals in the output. This includes collective interaction and expressing shared values in public spaces. The artists and designers at White Night can facilitate audience members to participate and to become co-creators with positive social outcomes. White Night has a large audience and with it the potential to affect positive social change as a collective and cooperative movement.

**Discussion**

The reason for visiting White Night was to experience the art works as well as to explore Melbourne’s laneways, which had been transformed by the event. White Night is as much an exploration of creativity as it is of the city and its people. People were as interested in the air of festivities as they were in the actual art works, but many visitors were there to witness the creativity and artistic expressions.

Some of the events were based on audience interaction. One particular event, “Dance Now”, encouraged the participants to burst into a dance routine as soon as some music starts playing. This was a true example of playful participation and audience engagement and an embrace of art as experience.

![Figure 1. Dance Now. Photo used with permission from Photographer Wayne Hawkins 2014.](image)

The most notable displays involving new media were seen in Melbourne's Federation Square. The architectural light projections were vivid and stunning, as described by many viewers. These clearly highlighted peoples' interest in visually appealing media and the transformation of public spaces and architecture. The festival could build on the audiences’ shared interest by accompanying visually engaging objects with viewing areas that encourage conversation amongst the viewers.

![Figure 2. Wonderland. Photo by Yun Tae Nam 2014.](image)
Socially Engaged Art Projects

*Vladmaster* is a handmade View-Master experience designed by Valadimir: A View-Master is a device to look at 3D color picture. It was widely used as a children's toy and for viewing tourist attractions. Viewmasters were in common use from the 1920s to the 1960s. It was interesting to see them in use during a contemporary arts festival, focussed on using the latest technologies. The physical interaction design was particularly interesting. An analogue touch based mechanism to navigate to the next scene with a pre-recorded narration. This unique involvement of a haptic (touch based) mechanism inspires design that encourages physical interaction and play.

![Figure 3. Vladmaster performance at ACMI. Photo by Yun Tae Nam 2014.](image3)

*Purple Rain* is an installation that uses sound and visual artwork to create an immersive experience. The name is a direct reference to the music of, and film featuring the performer Prince. It embraces the all night theme of White Night by using bright purple lights and showers of water to create a deep glowing effect that echoes the 1980s period that the film and music were made in. Audiences are given clear umbrellas so that they can get in underneath the artificial rain and see the light effects from various angles and music accompanies transitions in the light.

![Figure 4. Purple Rain. Photo used with permission from Photographer James Pang 2014.](image4)

This installation provides the audience with a unique sensory experience, not only through the effective use of visual content and sounds but also the audience engagements that create a starting point for interesting social interactions between audience-members in the installation environment. Taking pictures with each other or recording videos while the ‘rain’ is pouring down builds the feeling that they are sharing a common experience together. Smiling with each other, posing for the best pictures. They can also share the contents through social media as digital social objects that include the environment and audience interaction and participation as content.

The audiences are really participants and content generators because they also create sounds and scenes within the purple world. While holding umbrellas, or even without them, they freely play with the rain and generate sounds from their wet bodies. The combination of play and sharing a new world with other people can create an emotional experience and create new happy memories for the participants.

*Bouquet Final 2* is a large metal structure that towers several meters high. From the top of the structure, liquid bubble foam begins to pour down and envelop the whole structure. The effect is temporary as the bubbles burst and the liquid drains down to the bottom of the structure. The artwork appears to grow and decay like an organic object.

The installation gives the audience a visual and haptic experience at the same time. The generated bubble foam creates an unpredictable sculpture in real time and the shapes are unique in every moment of time. Unlike many sculptures in a museum environment that are not permitted to be touched, *Bouquet Final 2* is a haptic experience. Audiences can freely touch and feel the foam which gives them a new experience they cannot typically find in galleries and museums. Audience members could be seen putting foam onto each other and laughing and playing with the bubbles like they might have done in their early childhood. This experience has the potential to induce a sense of nostalgia of happy childhood memories.

![Figure 5. Bouquet Final 2. Photo by Yun Tae Nam 2013.](image5)

These three examples show successful applications of some of the conceptual frameworks of social objects, art as experience and art practice as cooperation. By embracing the freedoms of a short festival inside a public space, interesting experiences were created that facilitated play...
and physical and social interactions. By having environments that can be enjoyed as a shared experience, participants were also inclined to take photos, which could act as social objects, expanding the reach and effect of the festival beyond its physical boundaries. Further exploration of these concepts at the White Night festival could continue to build the social function of the event and provide inspiration for public art in general.

Limitations
There were limitations in compiling a review of writings on the White Night in Melbourne.
- Lack of reviews by art critics and new media experts
- Limited sources of literature documenting specific individual events

Conclusion
At White Night in Melbourne there have been diverse artistic expressions using old and new media artworks. Each artwork has its own forms of interaction and meaning for socially engagement. They enabled social interactions and participation via multimedia installation forms that showed the potential of socially engaging because much of the presented works have been focused on participants-led. Art practices in public space such as the White Night are valuable events for seeing how the public perceives public art.

People often follow social conventions to guide their use of public spaces. Interactive digital technologies allow them to make non-destructive but stimulating visual, audible and tactile experiences of their own design. The new use and conceptual image of that space changes their personal and social experience. By using frameworks that consider both artist-led and participant-led artwork that embrace co-creativity, a unique, socially engaging experience can be created that has ongoing social effects.

Many artists, organizers and community groups are trying to encourage social transformation through events that run for even just one night, such as White Night, by temporarily transforming the city into a part of art and entertainment. This event can be considered as a social-cultural playground with further potential for the public to experience art in a meaningful way for our society.

References

Author Biography
Yun Tae Nam has recently completed a Master Degree (Research) at Monash University, Australia. His interest lies primarily in multimedia design dealing with nature, human experience and technology for interactive installations. His several works had received awards in the Korea Design Exhibition in 2009, 2010 and 2011. He is also a nominated designer by Korea Institution of Design Promotion (KIDP) since 2011 and currently undertaking a PhD of Design degree in MADA | Monash University Art Design & Architecture and working as Associate Teaching member.