

# **CAPTAS: an urban-mobile artistic intervention in Brazil**

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## **Abstract**

The article focuses on the creative process of the urban-mobile intervention (2009-2010) of the Brazilian artists Fabio FON and Soraya Braz. The artwork emerges from reflections on the social implications of mobile technology – mainly the dissolution of tacit agreements of coexistence in urban areas. It also displays a history of experimentations that re-signify the very concept of the artwork at different times.

**Keywords:** art and technology, cell phone, mobile art, intervention.

## **1. Introduction**

Artistic productions in new media which arise from critical assumptions deny the up-to-date logic that is inherent to technology. The artists, in this case, do not only engage in creating according to the latest gadget, or reverberating the blessings of technology. In fact, these critical discourses intend to go beyond aesthetic reveries – the wonder of a device or digital image and their potential - pointing out the implications of the social insertion of technology in the relationships between individuals and/or machines.

Thus, *Captas* is an urban-mobile artistic intervention, produced between 2009 and 2010, based on the consequences of using mobile phones. The artwork consists of yellow raincoats with sensors that are sensitive to electromagnetic radiation, which are triggered when there are cell phones being used nearby. When that happens, the sensors make speakers that are placed in the raincoats go off, playing some pre-recorded conversations. *Captas* are flashy and noisy yellow raincoats. The person who wears these raincoats follows the distracted people who talk on their cell phones, making them part of noisy actions, framed by typical and predictable conversations pre-recorded in the raincoat equipment.



Image 1: Elements of *Captas* on display at the exhibition Mostra SESC de Artes 2010, in São Paulo, Brazil.

## 2. Some reflections

One of the main objectives of *Captas* is to discuss the social implications of mobile telephony in urban areas. In this regard, an urban area is understood as an environment in constant sharing, an area of coexisting in 'high speed', often managed by the tacit rules of interpersonal relationships. However, these rules are violated when exposed to ever weaker boundaries between what is public and private, in situations prompted by new technologies. In recent decades, we have followed an explosive increase in the use of cell phones, resulting in its popularization around the world. In the specific case of Brazil, data from October 2011 from the telecommunications regulatory agency of the country indicate that there are over 230 million phones in use in the country - which exceeds the total of Brazilian citizens. It is common to find mobile phone users who have never owned a landline at home, i.e. they integrate communication networks already under the paradigm of mobility.

The fact is that with the cell phone, people inhabit anywhere - naturally making themselves intimate with other individuals wherever they might be: the home ceases to be the single area of their intimacy. In public places feelings are shared, as well as ideas or phrases that a stranger would never hear before the adoption of the cell phone. People weep conspicuously on the phone, some yell angrily.

Mobility makes us build a *bubble*, a place designed as just ours (and our interlocutor's) that is re-populated every time a new phone call is made.

But this *bubble* occupied by the one who speaks will never be only indicated in physical space. This projection is its remote habitat, which provides the necessary conditions for the telepresence in mobility to become successfully effective. We project ourselves away from wherever we are. The phenomenon of telepresence involves an interesting finding: the destruction of the so-called *law of proximity*, since what is close necessarily ceases to be the most important thing. Abraham Moles debates on the matter:

As we enter the era of tele-presence, we try to establish an equivalence between "real presence" and "vicarious presence". This vicarious presence is destroying the organizing principle that our society has so far built. We call this principle *the law of proximity*: what is near is more important, real or concrete than what is far, less or more difficult to access... At the same, we live in an era of communicational opulence. We now have at our disposal more sources of communication and interaction than we will ever be able to use in our relatively short life time. This is an era of networked social systems, decorated with the futuristic title of Information Society (Moles cited by Fadon, 1997).

The phone is, according to Lévy (2009: 81), the first means of telepresence. The voice of the one who speaks on the phone - with its intonations and pauses - is actually present when the interlocutor receives it remotely. The concept is essential to understand the proportions of a contact that is effective in every conversation: the coexistence of a physical presence and a telepresence in the same individual. Telepresence implies a lack of perception. Remote involvement disables physical presence and its implications. When talking on the phone, we forget a little about where we are or who surrounds us - except when the local stimuli outweigh the remote involvement.

When telepresence becomes effective, many talkers lose their more accurate perception of the limits of their intimacy. Thus, a circumstantial absence is created, where the talkers are careless and become inconvenient: they expose, out loud, their most intimate conversations, when we have no desire to hear them; they bother us in inappropriate places such as cinemas, obligate us to share their opinions, prejudices, or even their lies - when the current location told by phone do not match the actual location of the one who speaks. In fact, we know well that in a tête-à-tête contact, both interlocutors are aware of where they are and of those who are around them.

The insertion of mobile technologies in urban areas offers us a new vision to the phenomenon of telepresence: the relational implication. What about the relation with strangers who share this involvement? In many situations, those who are not remotely involved get disturbed. The inconvenient person who talks on the phone in urban areas deprives the present people of the tacit right to know nothing, to do a quiet contemplation of places, things and people, the right to be immersed in

oneself.

Running against the stream, we believe that an effective way to problematize the issue is to interrupt the significant involvement afforded by distance. It is necessary to make the bubble more permeable. The talker can get used to the concomitance of both presences - remote and physical - without overpowering any of them when surrounded by other people. To carry out these propositions, nothing better than direct interference: invasive and reflectionist noise.

The Canadian artist Steve Mann, with his proposal of Reflectionism, is a fundamental reference on these reflections. He performs actions from surveillance areas (such as shopping malls and casinos), using his wearable computer equipped with a camera-eye and/or web connection to shoot videos of those who use surveillance equipment. These images are made public, reversing the situation. There isn't exactly an appropriation of the means, but of their strategies. The Reflectionism is seen by the artist as a new philosophical proposal and a strategy that takes the traditionally situationist methodology of appropriation of the oppressor's strategies as the first step to go on targeting directly, with the same methodology, the one who oppresses him/her (Mann, 1997).

Therefore, *Captas* is an invasive, straightforward attempt to repay the uncomfortable consequences of mobile technology. It's a noisy coat - noisy and flashy - that interrupts the talker, making him get back to the area of the present. Well, if staying telepresent is the rule - to the point that there are few individuals who do not have cell phones and many are those who already have more than one device - this action is necessary as a reflective and critical measure that wants to clarify the implications of the mobile technologies in the urban areas, in human relationships and in the perception of its users in different cities.

### **3. Experimentations**

When we talk about *Captas*, it is necessary to contextualize previous artworks such as *Roaming* (2007) and *Grampo* (2007), which use small chips met in pendants for mobile phones. These pendants are small transparent plastic dolls - which have colored lights that light up when a cell phone makes or receives calls or text messages. These devices are actually sensors that detect the electromagnetic radiation from the environment and make it explicit. Even if they are a decorative feature, the appropriation of these artifacts enables the discussion about mobile technology - mainly the invisible body that becomes present when mobile phones are used.

The first artwork made using those chips was *Roaming*, first presented in the exhibition Mobilefest 2007 - Festival of Mobile Art and Creativity, held at the gallery of SESC Avenida Paulista, in São Paulo. *Roaming* is a 1m<sup>2</sup> panel that consists of two overlapping sheets, one made of aluminum (which holds dozens of sensors) and another sheet made of glass (which has a sticker with the title word). Showcased in glass and stuck to a wall, the artwork reflects the image of those

who observe and/or get involved in the artwork while the lights indicate the possible presence of radiation. Interestingly, this first exhibition also had a 'dialogue' with its own location, as it took place in a particular area of São Paulo where the electromagnetic pollution is discussed, due to the concentration of several antennas of radio and television, in the most famous avenue of the city. *Roaming* was also displayed at FILE - Electronic Language Festival 2008, in São Paulo; at FILE RIO, in 2009; and at FILE POA 2011, in Porto Alegre.

After *Roaming*, the artwork *Grampo* (in English, Wiretap) was developed, also having dozens of sensors attached to an aluminum sheet. *Grampo*, however, differs from the previous piece by a deeper view of the particularities of mobile technology: the social implication of this technology, in which many speakers are not able to differentiate public and private areas, being so intrusive as the actual electromagnetic radiation that emanates from their devices.

The artwork consists, in addition to the sensors, of an Arduino controller board, audio speakers and an MP3 player that has a database of conversations recorded in public areas of São Paulo. These conversations were recorded without the consent of the intruding passersby. Hence the title of the artwork. In the exhibition area, when a cell phone emitting radiation was present - whether by calling or sending messages - the artwork would not only display many light sequences from the sensors, but also play the audio of disturbing conversations as some sort of noise hardly recognizable. *Grampo* was initially presented at the exhibition 27 Forms, at Paço das Artes, in São Paulo, 2007. In 2008, it was shown at the Campus Party Brazil, held in the Pavilion of the Biennale, São Paulo, February 11-17. It's from *Grampo* that *Captas* arises. Back to the artwork already discussed earlier in this text, three situations follow, between the years 2009 and 2010, that brought technical and conceptual improvements in the initial conception of the project.

### 3.1. *Appropriation* (2009)

*Captas*, at first, comes from two basic concerns: a need to transcend the limits of the exhibition area and actually find people who speak on cell phones in urban areas, and, at the same time, the intent to proceed with the idea of appropriation, present in previous artworks and so dear to media art. The first need was maintained later on. The discussion of social implications aroused by *Grampo* stimulated us to design the project with a significant reflectionist bias: to give back to the user of mobile telephones the intrusion that is so intrinsic to technology. The second concern has motivated us to develop a garment combining a similar system to the one present in *Grampo* - with the Arduino system connected to one of the sensors originally taken from the phone pendants - to a conventional raincoat.

Here, we can describe *Captas* as a yellow coat with a hood, which had an Arduino board at its front, as well as an electromagnetic radiation sensor and MP3 Player device connected to a battery. There was also a speaker - the only item located on

the back of the person who wore the artwork. However, the system was very unstable and the coat inevitably hot in sunny days. At that first moment, *Captas* was initially presented in 2009, at the exhibition of the event called #8ART - International Art and Technology Meeting, held in Brasilia.

### 3.2. *The anti-coat* (2009-2010)

The second moment of *Captas* then happens with the acquisition of resources through the Edital Arte Tecnológica 2009, of the Fundação de Apoio à Pesquisa of Rio Grande do Norte (FAPERN), which allows a project to be entered in the context of academic research, forming an interdisciplinary group of graduate students from different courses of the Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Norte (UFRN).



Image 2: *Captas* in São Paulo. Performed by Adriano Mattos, Diniz Jr. and Alexandre Mattos.

As a result, two lines of experimentation were established: first, a study about materials that were not only lighter, but that could also intensify a given unconventional situation; second, a search for references about other electromagnetic radiation sensors that could be capable of managing the emissions of pre-recorded intrusive sounds. Both lines of study resulted in significant improvement of the artwork, not only in the technical field but also

enriching its meaning: under the appearance of a raincoat, *Captas* got a permeable plastic screen, through which the person wearing it can be seen. An *anti-coat*, invariably useless to any claim of protection. The set creates not only an audible noise, but also visual, by the flashy yellow diffused in the gray urban landscapes.

From a technical standpoint, the controller board and the sensor coming from the pendants were replaced with a more robust electromagnetic radiation sensor, specially designed for the job, responsible for releasing the pre-recorded conversations each time radiation was emitted.

In 2009, *Captas* was presented in São Paulo during the MOBILEFEST 2009 - Festival of Mobile Art and Creativity. That same year two performances were held in urban areas: one in Natal and one in São Paulo. In 2010, the artwork is presented at the exhibition ART-Poetics-DIGITAL, during the 5th Seminar of Contemporary Art of the Universidade Federal de Santa Maria, Rio Grande do Sul and also at the Technological Art FAPERN event, organized by FAPERN at the Pinacoteca do Estado of Rio Grande do Norte, Natal, RN.

### 3.3. *Talking through the elbows* (2010)

Finally, *Captas* gets its third moment, when some concerns are incorporated about the performance that will be heeded in their current condition. The ironic assumptions of the artwork become even more emphasized at the moment when the speakers, initially located on the back of the person who wears the coat, are placed on the elbows. In different regions of Brazil, the expression “talking through the elbows’ is a popular term applied when individuals speak too much, bothering others with their verbosity. The coat concretizes this popular expression, bringing a new relational condition: the one who wears the coat can now point his/her elbows to people talking (on the phone). Whether using one or both arms, pointing the elbows to someone is not a friendly action at all: resting an arm or hand into the curve of his other arm, projecting the elbow of the forearm which was free, and holding a clenched fist is an act popularly known in Brazil as ‘giving someone a banana’. This gesture insinuates an offense based on not caring about the individual to whom the elbow is directed. This way, *Captas* expands its provocative and ironic strength, enriching itself.





Figure 3: *Captas* in Natal. Performed by Joevan Oliveira.

At this third moment, *Captas* was presented in the city of Natal during the event EXPOTEC of the Instituto Federal of Rio Grande do Norte in 2010, and also in São Carlos, in an action promoted by the research group NOMADS/USP of the Universidade de São Paulo, in 2011. This version was also shown at the show Mostra SESC de Artes 2010, in São Paulo, in the context of the Cibersewing Workshop with other wearable artworks made by Brazilian and foreign artists, organized by Gabriela Carneiro. During this show, an intervention was performed at the popular Gallery of Rock, downtown in São Paulo, a meeting place for punks, skaters, rockers and other urban tribes.

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