

# The Invisible Landscapes

The Construction of New Subjectivities in the Era of the Mobile Telephone



Miya Yoshida

Malmö Academies of Performing Arts, Lund University, Sweden 2006

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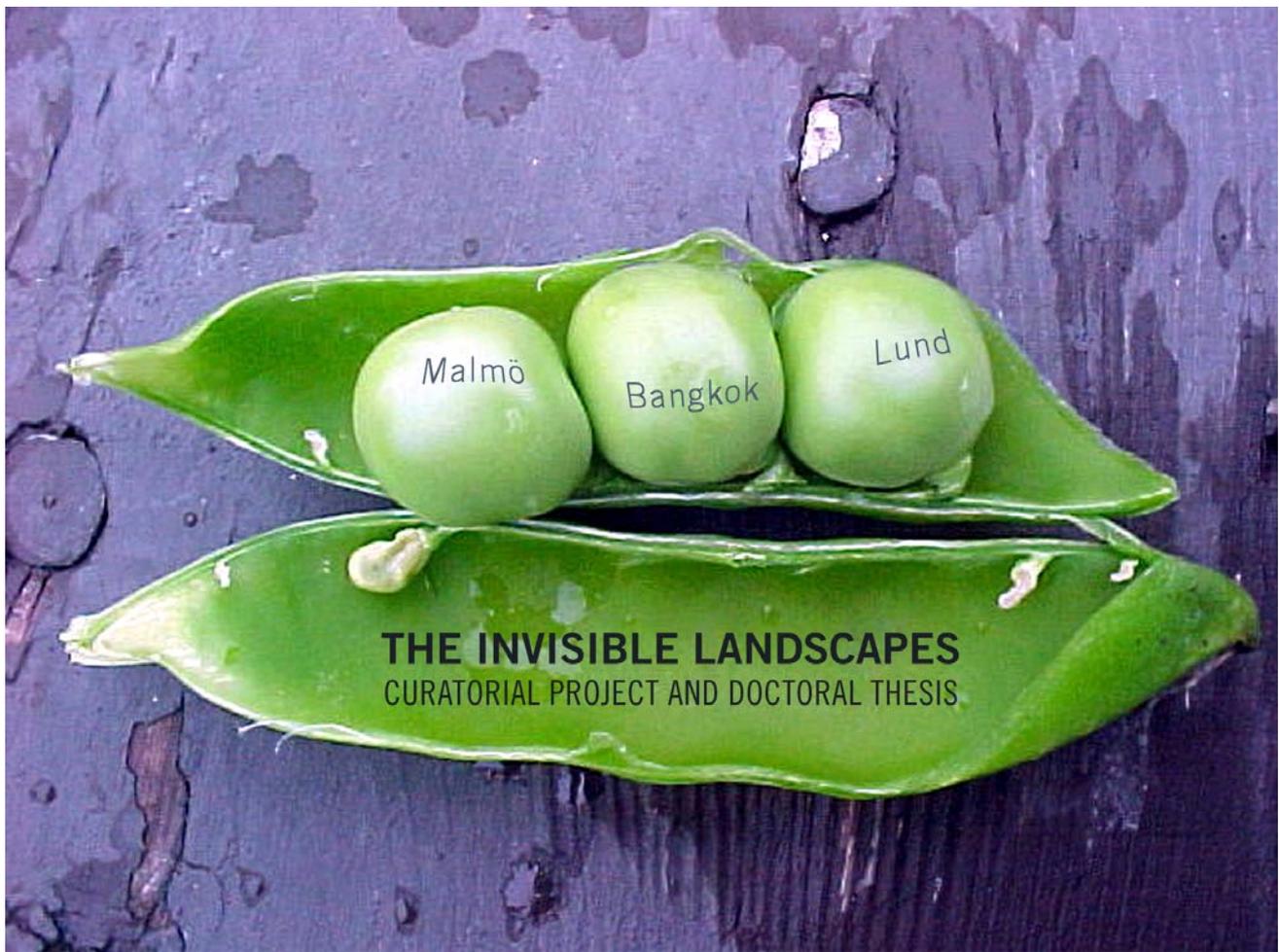
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Yoshida Miya, Malmö, August 2006



# Abstract

The interventions of portable digital devices such as mobile telephones, mp3 players, PDAs and many others, have contributed to the formation of contemporary notions of space. The impact of these devices' mobility (informing the users' mobility) could even be paralleled to the shift from the effects of still photography to those of film in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Especially important for the perspective of this study is the notion that mobile telephony is said to enhance the complexity of subjective space – for example by its passive aural communication functions questioning and relativising existing spatial boundaries. As this study can exemplify in many cases, the shift in spatialities is one that is first and foremost one that involves subjectivities – “objective” space remains unchanged, although the rhetoric of telecommunication hastens to suggest this. What has actually changed are the social institutions in public environments, implementing a variety of significant changes in the relation of public and private space as well as introducing critical changes in the perception of and attention for the self as related to an external social reality. This implies not only a transcendence of spatial models, but also modal change of our being-in-space.

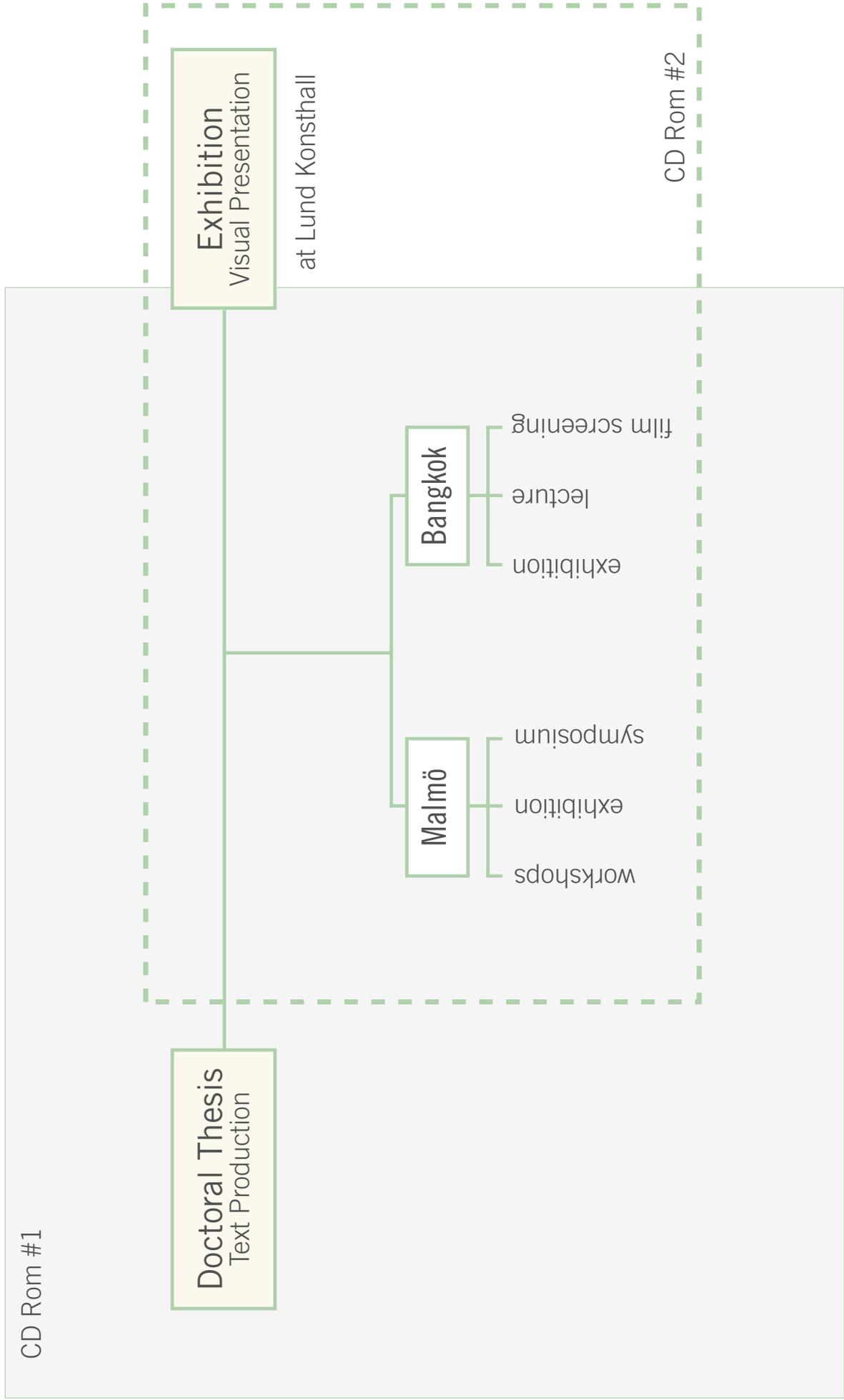
In order to think about these questions, I have developed the concept of a methodological “juxtaposition” out of the manifold evidence of historical and contemporary mobile communication – a quasi-“cubist”, multi-perspective research method that involves the retrieval and juxtaposition of artistic materials as well as found “non-artistic” elements – as my interdisciplinary working approach, since it promises to facilitate thinking about and in newly emerging spaces, which are complicated, if not impossible, to grasp within the confines of a single discipline. In order to develop this “juxtaposition”

based on concrete materials and observations in different fields of “commonplace” knowledge about mobile communication, I curated two interrelated art projects under the title *The Invisible Landscapes* – one in Malmö (2003), the other in Bangkok (2005). In both cases, I used a curatorial platform for testing, examining and collecting artistic and theoretical knowledge.

As a result of the valuable contributions of artists to these two exhibitions and the curatorial process connected to them, I was able to unfold the inherent contradictions, paradoxes and disjunctures in the way the space of mobile telecommunication is perceived individually and socially, and I have further developed them with an exploration of a collection of visual materials from the realm of mobile network communication. By navigating through these concrete materials – artistic, non-artistic / subjective, less subjective / visual and non-visual –, my study comes to conclude that phenomena to be described by a psychological “flatness” – a “flattening-out” of subjectivities to conform to a mode of existence that is replaced by capitalist economies and geopolitics mostly organized in networks – can be observed as one pervasive aspect of new modes of being in space produced through individual and collective uses of digital mobile communication.

# The Invisible Landscapes

comprehensive research map





# A. What's In The Bag?









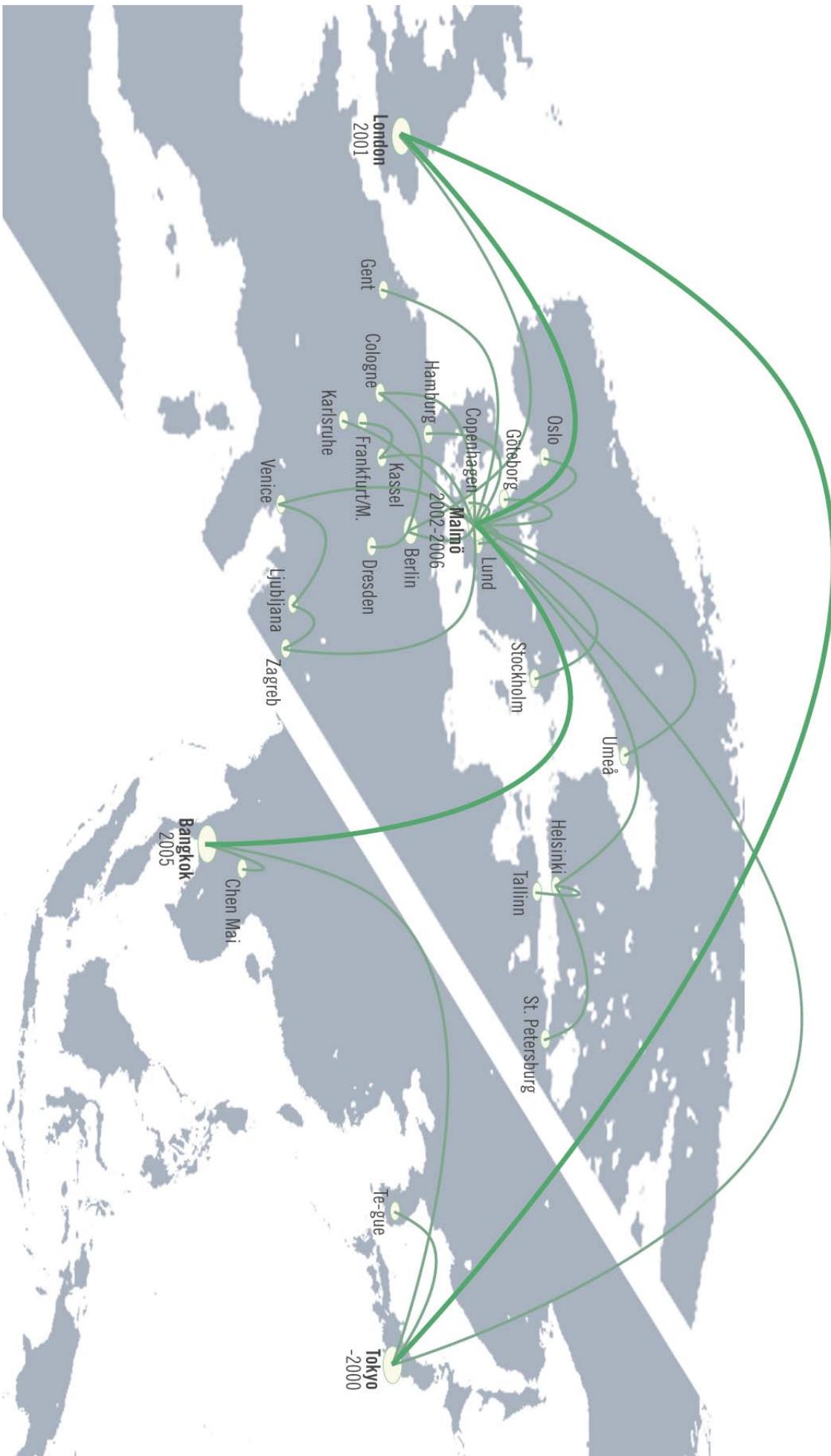












## A. Introduction

Portable media – mobile phones, Walkmans, iPods, PDAs, mp3 players, miniature gaming devices such as portable Playstations, Gameboys, and Xbox3 – have almost become indispensable parts of our portable luggage in contemporary life. Especially the mobile phone is today's most popular communication medium; whatever its more specific historical or technical definition, it is still in a process of transformation, so that at the point in time where my study sets in, it cannot be clear what it really is (if there is ever a single clear perspective on “organic” units of technological development). This is a point where mobile media are in the middle of an ongoing process of integration and re-formatting. Powerful devices like the mobile phone are promising unlimited connectivity. However, my personal experience with mobile telecommunication, especially outside of Japan, has had little to offer in the way of being “unlimited” and “smooth”. Receiving a call in the middle of a London traffic jam, with no possibility to actually have the conversation offered when buried in urban noise and the jolting movements of other disoriented participants in the same traffic, I would rush back home to return the call, but often arrived too late because of the geographical time difference – maybe even caused by a different speed of being. Life in London is simply not as calculable as it is in Japan, not out of personal mismanagement, but out of different conditions and relations to society, place and people. Such differences are not easy to overcome by imagination, not even by the conveniences of accessibility offered by today's communication technologies. Even though the mobile phone – my mobile phone! – is such a personalised device, I found it was very difficult to carry out personal communication even if using my mother tongue, and started to question what this communication really is.

Contrary to my personal experiences, the mobile phone has become an ever more multi-functional and powerful device. Much more than tools, they are influencing our perception of the world, as well as the way in which the world perceives us. For some, their promise also bears threatening qualities: not only here, being included in a network has advantages, but as soon as they turn into necessities, they also implicated in rational and irrational fears of being controlled, under surveillance, traceable. The two-sided potential of connectivity is now on an open-ended trajectory, from the already “connected” mobile telephony to that of other gadgets: the portable phone already incorporates a host of functionalities far beyond placing and receiving calls. It is becoming a model platform for the interconnection, fusion, and integration of all portable media – and promises to achieve the same with its users.

For many, mobile phone culture is already a normalised part of public/private life. But “the” mobile phone could also be seen as a comparatively brief episode within a longer process of the mobilization of communication. There have been many other mobile and static devices that, in some way or another, have fulfilled comparable needs as the portable, satellite-operated, private mobile phones of recent years.<sup>1</sup> As had been the case with Internet technologies, predecessors to modern mobile telephony can be found in the fields of military, police, and other state-run research that have only slowly transformed into “civilian” (or “civic”) versions of the earlier applications.<sup>2</sup> “The” mobile phone we

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<sup>1</sup> Telephony was invented in 1876 by Graham Bell. In 1924, half a century after this invention, a mobile radio telephone system was invented by Bell Laboratories. It first started to operate in 1928 Chicago police cars. After that, some trials and developments of mobile radio telephony did take place, but it took more than half a century for a commercial use of the analogue to emerge – when the first generation of cellular systems was launched. After the first transistor making the construction of a portable telephone possible was introduced in 1971, a patent for radio telephone systems was finally accepted in 1973 in the United States, and later, in 1975 put on trial by Motorola. However, commercial mobile telephony did not start until 1984. Satellite mobile telephones were introduced as low earth-orbit satellite projects in the 1990s, and then customised for use in mobile phones around 2000. <http://www.affordablephones.net/HistoryMobile.htm>.

<sup>2</sup> New technologies have always been firstly developed for military and policing purposes, and the mobile phone is no exception. The first portable telephone documented is from 1889 – primarily for railroad and canal works, and military purposes. Lars Magnus Ericsson, founder of what was to become the Swedish

are speaking of today represents a set of functionalities that stems from diverse previous uses and stages – including the precursors of many other possible functionalities not yet ready for implementation.

The statistics that are constantly invoked – the explosive diffusion rates of mobile phones in countries like Sweden, Finland, and Denmark, in relation to the smaller number of landline subscribers (**fig. 1**) – cannot be ignored, even if they clearly have to obey to a logic of progression and promotion. They are, at the present state of things and relations, too general to offer a deeper analysis of individual ”conditions of use“, such as the distribution of satellite or earth frequencies and bandwidth, the fees that have to be paid in order to remain competitive and “online“ within each country or political formation, and also ”internationally“, how the alleged ”transgression“ of fixed nation-state or other political boundaries is or is not working.

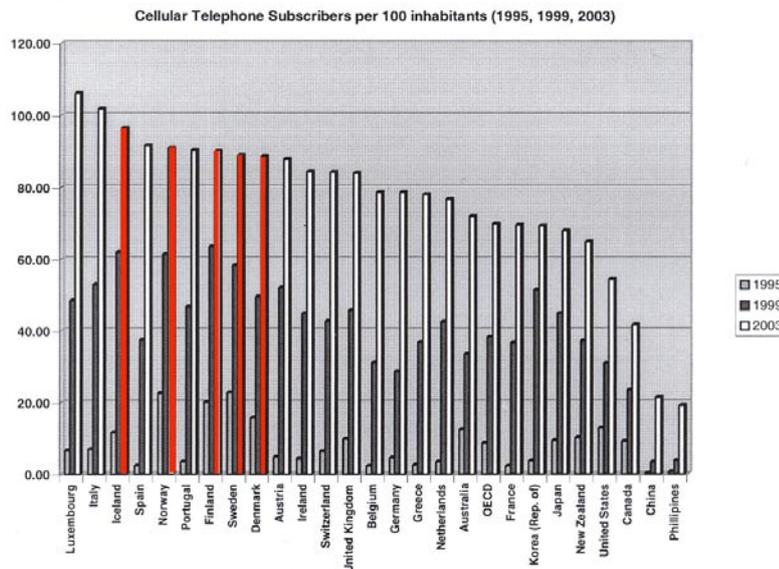


Fig. 1 Mobile telephone subscribers per one hundred inhabitants; years 1995, 1999, 2004.

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media corporation Ericsson had experimented with portable telephones for military use in 1890's. It was brought to South Africa by the Swedish Army during the Boer War (1899–1902) The mobile radio telephone system was invented in 1924 by Bell Laboratories. Marine communications also used the system at an early date.

While I am not seeking to propose a “foundational” phenomenology of mobile communication, this technology and its consequences can be considered nothing less than a major attempt at reorganizing world-wide structures or spheres of influence – and this certainly forbids getting lost merely in the details of microanalysis. Much in this sense, precise analyses of technical possibilities are of minor interest here compared to more general aspects of their “everyday” use – that will undoubtedly go on to inform the workings of technically organised social exchanges. The most important aspects here are those of mobility (portability), accessibility, and connectivity, aspects that have already marked the fundamental shift to the “newness” of this historical mixture of technologies. People not only listen to, talk, and share experiences and information with one another, but also with remote acquaintances by dislocating and dispersing the self in formerly public, not privatised spaces. These technologies of communication and the self in communication have opened up new spaces of potentiality, bringing “information culture” as an extension of visual culture that included methods for organizing and retrieving information as well as patterns of user interaction with information, object and displays.<sup>3</sup> “Information culture,” in this sense, is a culture of simulation. The notion of simulation, most prominently introduced by French philosopher Jean Baudrillard, questions and even negates the existence of one single, modern viewpoint and strives to open up multiple viewpoints. Mobile communication technologies again break down the multiplicity of perspectives from the abstract or technocratic theories to concrete practices in everyday life. It has become impossible to depart theoretically from the idea of a single space, be it public or private. Through ubiquitous networks and portable artefacts, individuals are capable not only of emancipating themselves from modernist simplification but are expected to transfer to reality what postmodernism proposed as the simultaneity of

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<sup>3</sup> Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media*, Cambridge, The MIT Press, 2001, p.13.

multiple viewpoints: download, reflects and distribute multiple views to spaces. This is more and more becoming an absolute condition of being in the world, which makes notions of space in general more complex. This is also true of the subject of communication.

After roughly fifteen years,<sup>4</sup> what does the “scene” of mobile telephony look like today? How do we understand such a scene? How does it affect us in our ways of being? Public and private spaces cannot be defined by pre-planned thought and conditions anymore, as these two constantly and continuously shift and intervene on different levels, transforming each other, dissolving, reappearing and emancipating themselves. Can these mobile gadgets be held responsible to be the instruments by which the privatization of public space and life is completed? Does their quality of “intimisation” relate or correspond to a general “decline” of public space? Transformations of space and life world also have affected notions of “intimacy”, which has now rendered intimacy to acquire multiple and more complex shapes. The invasion or fragmentation of (subjects in) space makes public spaces vulnerable, and simultaneously brings further complexity and questions to the morals and ethics of everyday acts. With reference to the importance of morals of everyday acts, Jürgen Habermas has emphasised the need to reconstitute the public sphere by bringing down politics from the level of the “system” into the everyday “lifeworld”.<sup>5</sup> How is this ideology relevant to a scene of mobile communication technologies? How can the subjective level constantly function to transgress the boundary into the social level of “system”? As a matter of fact, mobile communication technologies have already contorted and complicated such spatial boundaries in everyday life.

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<sup>4</sup> An alternative reading would assume a date twenty-five years ago.

<sup>5</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action. Volume I: Lifeworld and System: A Critique of Functionalist Reason*, trans. Thomas McCarthy, Cambridge: Polity Press. 1985. P.154

As this development is still unclear in the course it is taking, it is at least becoming clear to many that some aspects of this readily, almost generally available technology of communication may contain incalculable and unimaginable risks from the perspective of the political organization of public “security”; this surpasses the standard regressive or even reactionary reflexes that have accompanied all major changes in the history of media. It is a distinct element of such a criticism that “the speed and intensity with which both material and ideological elements now transnationally circulate have created a new order of uncertainty in social life”.<sup>6</sup> Parallel to this, a “decline” of the public sphere as well as of security is frequently deplored. It is true that we see more and more public space, or space that was once neutral or open, occupied by private capital in a continued process of expansionism, recently most iconically embodied by the phenomenon of shopping malls, which, despite their actual lack of economic success, are still promoted as pioneer carriers of venture capitalism. This – along with other issues – raises questions about recent developments of society and economy from the viewpoint of a (post)modernist agenda. Attesting to a decline of the public sphere, Jürgen Habermas affirmed the need to reconstitute what he considered to be “the public sphere” by reintroducing what he calls “thinking politics”. However, it is not easy to render the reasoning about public spaces more pragmatic without reconsidering past idealizing theoretical concepts of political thinking.

It seems that the infusion of a variety of properties into a fast-growing network of private-public media with their fundamental negation of formerly uncontested boundaries will not merely repeat discussions about the opposition of “public” and “private”. Rather, it seems more apt to predict that the promise of a “universality” will not remain one – but will lead to a whole new set of promises, if not a new “paradigm”. The anthropologist

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<sup>6</sup> Arjun Appadurai, “Dead Certainty: Ethic Violence in the Era of Globalization”, in *Development and Change* 29 (1998), pp. 905–925.

Victor Turner introduced the idea of the “liminal moment”, which he described as “a moment of passage when new cultural symbols and meanings can emerge”. It may be possible to apply statements like this to almost everything that is moving in processes of historical development. In this sense, mobile communication, more than being a moment of passage, could be approaching the discursive status of a meta-phenomenon in that it repeats, embodies, and epitomises what is moving, making the historical moment itself *moveable*.

Mobile telephony, even in the present, still occupies a rather specialised and limited stage. Still, it can be seen as being in a process of becoming the “role model” for technically organised communications in general. Can it still be described, to use Marshall McLuhan’s term, as a “cool” medium, such as the original telephone was? How does mobile telephony help us to understand contemporary scenes of communication? There are, however, certain aspects that, without falling into the trap of “utopian” prognostics – most frequently found in advertising, but also quite present in media studies and media art – offer an opportunity to discuss the impact of such a reorganization of social structures. More and more powerfully, spaces of communication are integrated into complex clusters by the interaction between communication industries and consumers/users. They suggest the existence of an “almighty”, direct and complete connectivity between any given subject A and any given subject B, and in the aesthetics of advertising illustrate the space of communication as a smooth, transparent continuum that is increasingly becoming more available and affordable. Has communication really become that simple? Whatever happens to the layers of meanings which cannot be encoded into digital data, which cannot be transported, where do they go, where does their negativity go? What kind of accountability does mobile telephony have? How do the spaces created through the use of mobile telephony contradict each other?

If we tentatively take into account McLuhan's idea that technology shapes the "mind" of users, how would mobile telephony then affect our way of thinking? What sort of topologies could mobile telephony be producing? If we see the contemporary era as a transition period, as a "liminal moment", what sort of new meanings are produced through portable technologies? Is its performative value in the foreground, or is it a sort of display, a rendering conspicuous, of private matters in public? Or does it amount to a "mediatization" of everyday life? If technology opens up new spaces for communication, are we transforming ourselves to fit into such new conditions, do we open up a new self? It is a simplification in itself – but a widespread and very effective one – that the digital mode of thinking, "1/0", "on/off" and "yes/no" – oversimplifies what is regarded as the "contents of culture", or the practice of everyday life, the way in which we operate, manage, master, craft, engineer, create our lives. How does such a mode of operation of thinking affect our ways of being? Keeping these questions in mind, in the following I will focus on three primary issues:

- a) the uses, and consumer strategies that have been developed in the context of mobile telephony,
- b) the way in which artistic and/or curatorial strategies can be considered fruitful in a discussion of these developments and in the construction of a critical condition around them,
- c) the way visuals and audios are constructive and manipulative within these conditions.

To describe the geopolitical as well as the epistemological effects of mobile telephony in such a way that it can offer a bridge back to previous notions, I have decided to talk of a spatial-economical, political, social and perceptual complex that I have come to call "invisible landscapes", landscapes being created by newer communication and navigation

technologies. Using this notion equivalent of a perceptual and political space where the social and the individual as well as the public and the private are to be negotiated, it becomes possible to not only address the unifying rationale (or ideology) of networks or other technological platforms in their own terms, but to remain connected to the (also artistic/aesthetic) notion of "landscape" as a category that pertains both to the fields of the political and the imaginary, and to address social "markers" that correspond to degrees of visibility in each society / group / context, opening up better possibilities for a discussion that includes rather than excludes artistic and curatorial modes of knowledge production and/or criticism, which may or may not fit comfortably in existing academic categorization.

To see the social model being processed through such diverse, in part "quasi-naturalistic" (in as far as they claim to subvert naturalism) discourses may be a cause for worries – worries that should be dealt with seriously – but, if possible, starting from as few idealist concepts as possible, especially considering the wealth of very "material" (as opposed to "idealist" notions flaunting the "immaterial" character of mediated communion) information that can be collected on resources, as well as productive and distributional structures around mobile telephony.

Departing from the notions of "invisibility" and "landscapes", I will proceed to combine aesthetical and political aspects in a possible discussion of mobile phones from a variety of non-specialist viewpoints, a multiplicity of views that was once developed in literature and art as "cubist", but also, as in Kurosawa's *Rashomon*, takes juridical, forensic modes of (re)construction as its model. It must be mentioned here that my methodology includes three stages of work that are "external" to my written dissertation: The Invisible Landscapes was and is the title for three exhibitions, one in Malmö, one in Bangkok, one in Lund. Their contribution to this project is indeed crucial, as they helped to introduce

rich inspirations from artistic forms of research and knowledge, a complex of sources that is not easily categorised as one single discourse but represents a multi-faceted array of different experimental types of knowledge. My curatorial work in this field, that was an important initial impulse, was to research, discuss and present types of informal exploration – a type of research that, in itself, is historical in that it also represents present-day mainstream and alternative elements of mediated production.

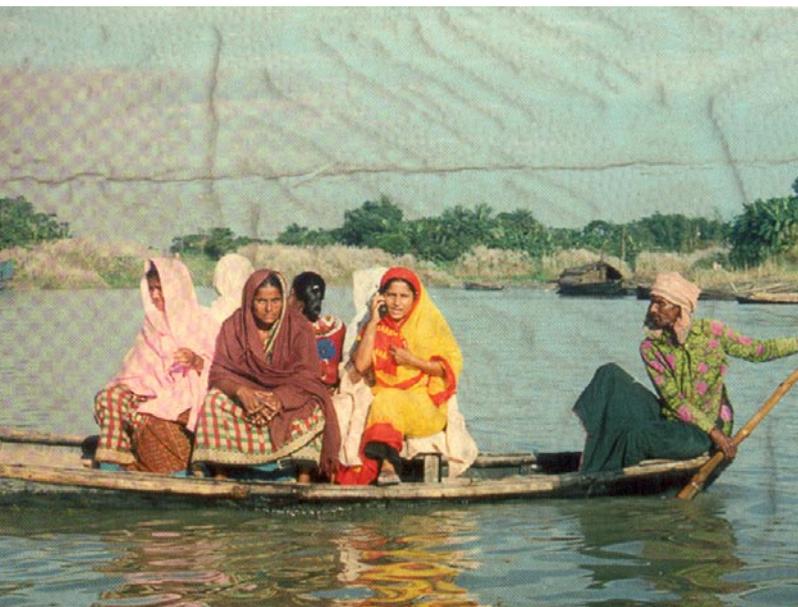
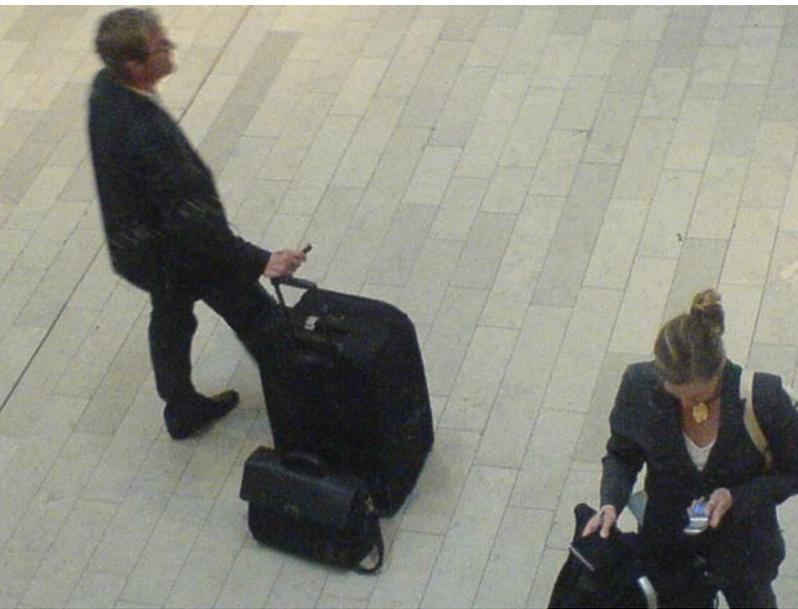
The exhibitions involved a great number of international artistic and non-artistic producers who were juxtaposed and commented upon by my own research results on different aspects, for example my exploration of the material basis of global Coltan trade as the basis of a political discussion of the phenomena at stake – that are not debatable on an aesthetic level alone. That was also the reason to combine the exhibitions with a conference and a workshop. The written dissertation represents the attempt to document such an interaction over a period of three years, but also tries to carefully consider possible consequences by “juxtaposing” – dialectically combining the diverse contributions – without trying to fix them into easy definitions and conclusions. The objective was and is to present different approaches, exposing them to potentially unsecured encounters with what seems to be opposite or contradictory. The use of mobility and its technologies is presented in relation to theoretical concepts of new subjectivities that are emerging as a consequence of new forms of social ordering and conditioning. In a time where mobility is a crucial signifier in any discussion of curatorial activities within and without the so-called “art world”, I hope to offer relevant elements of methodological reflection by addressing what is still in “flow”, not yet fixed, still on the way to the peak of normal.





B. Connected People

















## B. The Invisible Landscapes: Spatial Imaginaries

### B.1. The Invisible Landscapes

This study sets out to discuss contemporary artworks on and around mobile telephony – images, sounds, texts, and others – as well as notions used by those who are involved in the production of social imaginaries. It is based on the analysis of works that allow us to clarify the structure, functioning, and experiential qualities of mobile telecommunication as related to previous telecommunicative ways of interacting between individuals and/or matters that were limited to "immobile" networks. Strictly speaking, those early networks were of course also "mobile" in a sense of expansion, that is: not by the design of individual users, but as an expansive "movement" of constructive activities facilitating global, transatlantic, and extra-orbital communications closely tied to construction-related industries and urban planning. It may be necessary to keep this mode of expansive movement in mind, since it has not stopped with the advent of mobile technologies, but has now developed to become ever more complex, incorporating individual, erratic, non-linear movements in "everyday life". Indeed, the comparatively short but significant cultural career of the mobile phone can be seen as one excellent example of this.

The term "landscape," used in the title of this dissertation as well as in the exhibitions presented in preparing and developing it, has been deliberately chosen as a historical reference. At the same time, this term is also being de-formed and re-formed in various contemporary media philosophies and theories; I will explore this in the following pages. First, I would like to sketch out my specific take on "landscape". As today we cannot speak of any "original" reference or relation to this concept, it makes sense to

define it as a set of conventions and agreements, as an artificial code used for many different interests. Landscape, in this historical respect, is also an optical structure composed of lines that extend to and across a horizon of visibility, as designed and claimed from a specific panoptical vantage point. Historical landscapes were idealised concepts, the centre they represented was a symbolic one. Standing on the top of a mountain, many rulers defined their spheres of influence as realms that included each and every thing visible from that point; but the important rhetorical gesture was to claim spaces and objects behind, beyond that horizon line. Speaking of landscapes today, I have to acknowledge that the “centredness” of ideal perspective is now no longer a privilege of the ruler, but in the meantime has been inscribed time and again into modern subjectivities. “Subjects”, formerly an expression for *subjugated* individuals, now describes a far more complex relation between individual realities. For our context, the landscape is a metaphor for subjectivity in an overarching complex of mobile temporal spatialities and unfixed identitarian states that have become significant today. The factual mobility of the media-operated grasp on the world-as-landscape is what most clearly defines the transformation of the term “landscape” here. This flow of landscapes is constituted by multiple aspects between a systematic level to that of an everyday experience, which I will elaborate in the following.

Since the 1990s, the complexity of these media-related contemporary realities has been discussed in different fields<sup>7</sup> of cultural studies, political sciences, anthropology, media studies, and others, introducing new terms and concepts to describe an interconnected plurality of consumer-producers and their imaginaries. Arjun Appadurai,

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<sup>7</sup> See for example: *Modernity at Large* by Appadurai (1996), *The Information Age: Economy, Society, and Culture* by Manuel Castells (1996/97/98), *Globalization* by Jan Aart Scholte (2000), *Political Machines* by Andrew Barry (2001), “Virtual Landscapes of Memory” by Maja Mikula in *Information, Communication and Society* (2003) and a series of conferences called *The Planetary Collegium*, which has been organised by Roy Ascot since 1997.

for example, addressed the fact that “...there has been an important shift in recent decades, in which the imagination has become a collective, social fact. This development, in turn, is the basis of the plurality of imagined worlds.”<sup>8</sup> Reflecting on such conditions, Appadurai proposed the notion of the “disjuncture” to indicate significant difficulties one faces in the analysis of a globalised society from a single point of view; and, accordingly, he has suggested five dimensions of global “cultural flow” as an elementary framework for exploring those disjunctures (Appadurai, 1996) transgressing cultural boundaries, which he calls “scapes”: 1) “ethnoscapes”,<sup>9</sup> 2) “technoscapes”,<sup>10</sup> 3) “financescapes”,<sup>11</sup> 4) “mediascapes”,<sup>12</sup> and 5) “ideoscapes”,<sup>13</sup> ideologies of states and counter-ideologies of movements, around which nation-states have organised their political cultures. Especially with the influence of technological changes over a century in mind, he emphasised the importance to consider “technoscapes” and “ethnoscapes” in rapid processes of “mutual contextualizing”<sup>14</sup> or displacement of technology and persons in a complex topology. Appadurai’s schematic proposal certainly invites us to think of other “scapes” – but it is exactly of the mutability of a notion of landscape by adding different prefixes that is

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<sup>8</sup> Moving and imagining moving: infrastructural software on the technoscape, p. 3.

<sup>9</sup> “By *ethnoscape*, I mean the landscape of persons who constitute the shifting world in which we live: tourists, immigrants, refugees, exiles, guest workers, and other moving groups and individuals constitute an essential feature of the world and appear to affect the politics of nations to a hitherto unprecedented degree.” Appadurai (1996), p. 33.

<sup>10</sup> “By *technoscape*, I mean the global configuration, also ever fluid, of technology and the fact that technology, both high and low, both mechanical and informational, now moves at high speeds across various kinds of previously impervious boundaries.” Ibid., p. 34.

<sup>11</sup> [Financescape:] “The disposition of global capital is now a more mysterious, rapid, and difficult landscape to follow than ever before, as current markets, national stock exchanges, and commodity speculations move megamonies through national turnstiles at blinding speed, with vast, absolute implications for small differences in percentage points and time units.” Ibid., pp-34–35.

<sup>12</sup> “*Mediascapes* refer both to the distribution of the electronic capabilities to produce and disseminate information (newspapers, magazines, television stations, and film-production studios), which are now available to a growing number of private and public interests throughout the world, and to the images of the world created by these media.” Ibid., p. 35.

<sup>13</sup> “*Ideoscapes* are also concatenations of images, but they are often directly political and frequently have to do with the ideologies of states and counter-ideologies of movements explicitly oriented to capturing state power or a piece of it. These ideoscapes are composed of elements of the Enlightenment worldview, which consists of a chain of ideas, terms, and images, including *freedom, welfare, rights, sovereignty, representation*, and the master term *democracy*.” Ibid., p. 36.

<sup>14</sup> Appadurai, 1996, p.5

advantageous in comparison with other established terminologies of space, terminologies that need to be considered here as well.

In media studies referring to significant shifts in information values and technologies, Manuel Castells has taken recourse to the long-established notion of the “network” in order to render the complex and sometimes self-contradictory dynamics of “flow” in the information era understandable. Recently, the notion of “networking” has been widely adopted in political, administrative, marketing, cultural, and many other fields, as a model and a metaphor. The wide diffusion of the term is partly due to its potential to be suggestive of alternative, progressively developing structures, but it is also open enough to remain “promising” and to stimulate other, more utopian imaginations for the future. However, there are several critical points in the use of “network” here. One is that it remains abstract and general. Second is that the usage of the notion frequently ignores its historical background – including World War II mainframe computing and the Cold War context of ARPANET – that network technologies stem from government, military, and economic developments and spheres, and still contain their notional and structural frameworks inside their systems. It therefore seems highly advisable to apply much caution before easily adopting this term without a specific context.

Questioning further the specific topology of networks, the British sociologist Andrew Barry has asked for a novel way to describe them and to explore what sort of frictions exist within them. In his book *Political Machines: Governing a Technological Society* (2001), Barry has critically analyzed the problematic use of the notion of “network” both as a metaphor and a model – basing his criticism mainly on the biased image of information and political predominance it conveys. Starting from Appadurai’s “technoscapes”, he developed a new point by introducing the notion of the “(technological) zone”.

Helping to conceive of an organization of governance – state, empire or nation – the concept of the “technological zone” functions flexibly, making it possible to translate new asymmetries between different locations and situations, while “networks” remain confined to be makers of “new” politics (Barry, 2001) and have become a fashionable catalyst for re-imagining a dominant sense of political urgency. The term merely replicates the functionalism and technological determinism of the dominant political discourse of the European institution. In “Notes on the State of Networking”, Geert Lovink and Florian Schneider also speak of various kinds of “networks” as structures and their potential to resist what they, hinting at Toni Negri and Michael Hardt’s term “info-empire”. They admit that “networking has lost its mysterious and subversive character” after the hype around networks – that the notion has revealed its conceptual emptiness. Still, they see networks as viable alternatives to waves of popular conspiracy theories and as a medium of “freedom”, when they describe them as “a syncope of power” against traditional hierarchies and existing structures.<sup>15</sup>

The danger of a romanticizing view of networking as a counter-cultural cliché is one point here that seems hard to accept. Responding to Lovink and Schneider’s statement, Alexander Galloway has also found their definition of “info-empire” too general; he felt it is lacking a precise perspective or a further specification of the actual technologies contained within networks.<sup>16</sup> The generalizing use of “networks” often leads to a “metaphysics of the network”. The concept then starts to pick up speed without actually having anything to do with actual networks in a contemporary everyday sense. Instead, and focusing more on the technological aspects of networks, Galloway has proposed the

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<sup>15</sup> Geert Lovink and Florian Schneider, “Notes on the State of Networking”, Feb. 29, 2004 in *nettime*. <http://www.nettime.org/Lists-Archives/nettime-l-0402/msg00099.html>

<sup>16</sup> Alexander Galloway, “The Limits of Networking”, March 25, 2004, in *nettime*; <http://www.nettime.org/Lists-Archives/nettime-l-0403/msg00090.html>

term “protocol” to think the apparatus of political control and technological networks.<sup>17</sup> According to his analysis, the notion of “protocol” indicates an apparatus that facilitates networks and a logic of governing rules of relationships within networks.

“Protocol” as well as “network” both stem from computer science and the so-called “life sciences”. They may give people a sense of relief because they sound “technological” enough to emanate a feeling of legitimacy. However, terminologies like these create the impression of an already existing, but somehow vague and unknown apparatus, which is still in an open process of becoming, and they are dragged into existing technological structures without much consideration. In addition to that, in exploring the general effect of tentative terminologies we have to take into account that the “free use” of terminology drags its unreflected particles right into the network technological structure, and the terms are allowed to already syncopate or limit the unimaginable.

If we consider mobile telecommunication to be part of a “network society”, layers of political, commercial, bureaucratic, organizational, spatial complexity are permanently being added: for example, through permanently renewed industrial transmission standards, which, compared to the simple user-client structures in landline networks also necessitate novel ways of an increasingly flexibilised organization. But it is not only this technological and logistic complexity that produces serious difficulties to imagine the workings of a political organigram (or comparable image formats) in sufficient detail to “know one’s place/location”<sup>18</sup> within an ephemeral structure. Tasks like this cannot be resolved by the broadcast media structure developed in traditional media theory. If one agrees to consider mobile telecommunication as a crucial mode of social interaction and

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> For an early example of artistic/curatorial work on “locatedness”, see “Us trobeu aquí. Arquitectura i fluxos d’informació / You are here. Architecture and Information flows”, eds. Laura Kurgan and Xavier Costa, Museu d’Art Contemporani de Barcelona, Barcelona 1995.

management, this calls for a reflection of processes within social (un)imaginaries that think, dream, perceive, symbolise, express, and discuss notions and images by which this new stage of technical interaction is being understood by its users and/or organisers.

The strong capitalist interest in the mobile telephone industry has led to an increasing worldwide quantity of related advertising. By promoting images of the mobile phone as markers for a “cool” and “trendy” social habitus, mobile telephony has even become something like the sexy version of McLuhan’s “extension of the body” and, as such, occupies important spaces in contemporary spectacularised life. In order not to remain within the assumptions of an ”uncanny“ epistemology, this process of understanding is already going on – in the most diverse organised and unorganised ways.

In the age of material and immaterial mobility and connectivity, animate and inanimate organisms, things are on the move, reflect each other and are in constant processes of transformation. Mobility and connectivity signify open doors to something new, and seem to open up new fields of possible action. The quality of connectivity in itself remains unpredictable, allowing for unknown relations to be established and expanded. Telecommunications have for a long time been described as complex and mysterious and potentially dangerous, while contemporary conditions make it almost impossible to see any “big picture” or to get a valid impression of the ”whole“,<sup>19</sup> especially when one is not limiting oneself to root in a particular field. All these conditions suggest the necessity to reconsider relevance of mobile telephony through contemporary art and related issues such as how new technology involves the field of art.

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<sup>19</sup> R. Buckminster Fuller emphasised critical needs of humanity of a „big picture“ – as a context of the whole global system in many of his writings, see “Operating Manual for Spaceship Earth”, New York, Southern Illinois University Press 1971.

## Why “The Invisible Landscapes”?

Not only the term “landscape”, “invisible” has been very much in use by now as well. In a sense, the title “The Invisible Landscapes” may not evoke any strong surprise in an unexpected, catchy or fashionable way. However, I see more potential in this familiar term to explore deeper concepts in a more generalised and communicative way. As already discussed, I hesitate to use particular terms taken from computer science and turn them into metaphorical speech, such as “networks” or “protocol”, because they inevitably carry linear, binary connection of thought with them. On the contrary, I would like to include a non- (or trans-) computational as well as a non-logistic mode of thinking and imagining into my research. In other words, I deem any seemingly minor or subtle phenomena just as important as “major” or distinct ones, because they all constitute the world we live in, a world that may be expected to exist outside of or apart from “networks” and “zones”. There may be a world that cannot be homogenised into a “protocol” language. The notion of the “zone” has difficulties to include the temporal dimension, and it lacks an affiliated concept of mutual contextualisation. But the plurality of imaginations on this level is a crucial part of the notions of “landscape” I am using here. Being inclusive and collective, the notion of “landscapes” is more apt than previous notions for the research I envision.

By using the notion of the “invisible landscapes”, I am referring to a variety of “invisibilities” in daily life that are clearly triggered by the new communication technology of the mobile phone. For instance, there are curious tensions within special and perceptual changes triggered by an almighty connectivity and accessibility, questions of surveillance, power of capital and politics behind world-wide diffusions, the infrastructure of wireless connectivity, globalisation issues around the consumer device of the mobile phone, rumours and myths on the effects of radiation on the human brain, and

so on. All the above consists of modulations of new realities stemming from direct individual acts, but they automatically put us into a relation with questions of politics, media, advertising, and mass imaginaries.

As an answer to the neutral term of the “zone,” while seeking for possibilities to grasp the complexity of the digital mobile communication, I have decided to use the notion of “landscapes”. This historically rich notion is, both directly and indirectly, and subjectively and non-subjectively, linked to diverse social associations, interpreting them according to layers of human activities such as history, culture politics, perceptions and imaginations. Needless to say, “landscape” has been used as an ideological artistic metaphor in cartography, painting, and literature from the Middle Age, the Renaissance, and far into Western modernity. Continued into the contemporary, “landscapes” connects some experimental ideas and imaginaries: to name but one example, consider the title of a series of works by John Cage.<sup>20</sup> In addition, post-modernism has reassessed and developed a connotation of a critical approach to geography, in unison with a critique of cultural determinisms. Foucault, for example, using the notion of “landscape,” was able to extract deeper power structures in governance and capitalism. Roland Barthes approached landscape in semiotic concerns to extract more layers of meaning out of (textual) landscapes. In comparison with these uses of “landscape”, other notions – networks, territories, regions – show themselves to be just as much politically connected, which automatically regulate those spaces I try to explore with limited associations. Especially, these terms are based on results from media studies, and are developed on the model of

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<sup>20</sup> John Cage worked on an early series of live performance works he called “imaginary landscapes”. The first series, *Imaginary Landscape No. 1*, was created in 1939; here he experimented with conventional instruments and electronic devices in a variable speed record player. Later, in *Imaginary Landscape No. 4* (1951), he experimented with his concept of chance using twelve radio receivers.

broadcast media. However, the mobile phone may be an “intimate medium”<sup>21</sup> (Kluitenberg), “the first towards a micro-politics of resistance against the broadcast hegemony.” This is also why it makes no sense to adapt the term “network” for spaces created by mobile telephony. These spaces imply many social structures, cultural traditions, economic activities and political patterns and more illegitimate spaces, all of which can explore and alter the notion of “landscape” deeply and significantly.

Applied to contemporary mobile communication landscapes, it can be used as an equivalent to subjective, spontaneous interactivity – in terms of perception, description, depiction and reaction – as well as political, social and economical interactivities.

Returning to the phrase “landscapes are texts with multiple meanings,”<sup>22</sup> it implies individual results of attitudes and interactions – what we see, hear, talk, and think – as well as mass imaginaries in daily life. Especially in the case of personalised technologies, human agency with its flow of activities and productions is a crucial factor of the “scapes”. They may belong to different layers in a process of transformation, but constantly affect our physical and psychological environment. The collectives of subjective imaginaries are as important as the abstract discourses. Instead of decoding the representation within landscapes, media theorist and art historian W.J.T. Mitchell has proposed a reverse hypothesis on landscapes as instruments of cultural power, of imperialism, or nationalism.<sup>23</sup> His approach implies that the notion of landscapes is not limited to representation, but stretches “beyond”.

Consequently, the impulse of the mobile phone’s existence forces us to think non-legitimate invisible domains and helps us to raise a set of questions. Which new way of

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<sup>21</sup> Eric Kluitenberg, “Transfiguration of the Avant-Garde / The Negative Dialectics of the Net, Jan. 23, 2003 in nettime. <http://www.nettime.org/Lists-Archives/nettime-l-0201/msg00104.html>

<sup>22</sup> Barthes, Roland: “The Death of the Author” in Roland Barthes: Image, Music, Text. London: Fontana Press, 1977 (first published in *Aspen*, ed. by Brian O’Doherty, no. 5/6, 1967).

<sup>23</sup> W.J.T. Mitchell, *Landscape and Power: Space, Place and Landscapes*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press. 2002, pp. 20–22.

invisible communication is created here, based on what type of cognition? Does cognitive science help us to understand visible as well as invisible phenomena in this context? What form of thinking does it produce? Is the visual simply limited to surface visibility, does it create the invisible within the visible? What kinds of invisibilities are emerging through mobile telecommunication? How are senses and organic function or dysfunction affected by these activities?

Although the mobile phone is already so incorporated into most of our daily lives, more serious and/or independent forms of research into its impact have only recently begun. Although volumes after volumes have been published, a great deal of which was funded by major telecommunication corporations, very few of these publications are actually known to a larger (scholarly, cultural, artistic) public. In this sense, the existing studies on the mobile phone can be considered as crucial connecting points for different disciplines to cultivate, grow and reflect a contemporary mode of thinking. In order to find ways not only to sensitively perceive phenomena, but also to understand both the invisible, the visible and the invisible in the visible, and to create a positive implementation out of new realities, I have pursued a research process in two exhibitions, *The Invisible Landscapes*, curated in Malmö (2003) and in Bangkok (2005). A third, conclusive exhibition will be held in Lund (2006).