

1. Projects



Texel. Suspending time at the train station.

Finished research

According to Hartmut Rosa, mobility no longer refers to space but to the time required to travel across that space. The ever-present display systems at train stations tend to reinforce that very same perception of travel time as an objective, a measurable length of time, rather than a feeling wherein each duration is variable. This experimental project, led by artist-researchers at EnsadLab, aims at reintroducing a subjective relation to time and place at train stations by means of interactive hourglasses.

Research participants

Researchers

- Ianis Lallemand
- Lyes Hammadouche
- Francesca Cozzolino
- Anne Bationo Tillon
- Clara Meyer

I. The Research

Time has become a metrical value of reference in our daily commutes. As such, people are able to determine with greater accuracy how long their journey to work or place of study takes than the actual distance travelled. However, this “metric” use of time seems to come at the expense of the feeling that each duration is variable; given that each interval can be evaluated and instantly communicated, any deviation from the nominal duration is seen as an anomaly. In train stations, the omnipresence of visual display systems tends to reinforce our perception of travel time as an objective, measurable, calibrated duration. Commute trips, particularly time spent in train stations, thus tends to be experienced as an

obligation devoid of interest – as dead time. The attention we pay to the places we pass through when we commute is therefore lessened by this “utilitarian” vision of commuting.

Reversing the accelerated pace of daily life, the Texel project encourages travelers to step out of their bubbles and routines, and to create a hiatus in their daily commutes to enjoy a sensory experience that urges them to change their perception of their travel time. The train station once again becomes a place of mobility versus the current tendency to optimize and flows and minimize traffic, producing but a mere connection node between transport networks. Specifically, the project more attempts to clarify the question, “Can we improve the quality of our mobile lives by changing our relationship to the time we spend in train stations?”

The project consisted of designing and testing an interactive artistic device created to change commuters’ experience of the time spent in transit areas, in this case train stations. It was led by two young artists - Lyes Hammadouche and Ianis Lallemand - as part of their creative PhD project “Science, Arts, Creation and Research” of PSL Research University within the Reflective interactions group of the EnsadLab (the laboratory of École nationale supérieure des Arts Décoratifs), under the supervision of Samuel Bianchini. Several academic disciplines and trades were involved in developing the project: in cooperation with the artist-researcher team, EnsadLab engineers and SNCF agents helped implement technical and practical aspects. Notably, the computerized development of the interactive system was designed by Colin Bouvry (EnsadLab), the computer development of the motorization by Didier Bouchon (EnsadLab), the exhibition furniture at the station by Charles-Henry Fertin and the production monitoring for the exhibition at the station by Emmanuelle Barbey (EnsAD).

The work, called Texel (a contraction of the words temps (time) and pixel), is composed of interactive hourglasses. Hourglasses were attached to a frame via two metal arms, a motor (attached to the outside of the frame) and movement sensors. The hourglasses are activated according to commuters’ comings and goings: the unit rotates on its axis each time someone approaches or moves away, affecting the flow of sand, which accelerates, slows down or stops. The changes in the sand flow rate - visible to commuters - re-reflect the intensity of their interaction with the unit, as well as the device’s ability to “fill” time. The amount of sand at the bottom of the hourglass indicates the time spent during the interaction. However, the duration, is relative and based on a sensory experience. The work’s interactive dimension makes it such that travelers can only understand its meaning by deviating from their trajectory and spending time interacting with it. Thus, Texel offers a changing and variable representation depending on the individual and his or her choices with regard to the work. A guided tour with Samuel Bianchini describes the work’s design process.

Ermont-Eaubonne station (Val d’Oise) was chosen to host Texel for a month, from November 16 through December 16, 2015. Designated as a “laboratory station” by SNCF, it is also one of the busiest stations in Ile-de-France, with 35 000 passengers per day. Many travelers regularly frequent the station for their daily commutes. As such, the work also faced the challenge of the recurrence of experience. Texel was deployed in two areas and in two different formats:

- In the main connections hall: a linear set of eight hourglasses;
- On the mezzanine between the doors leading to J line: a single hourglass.

The station installation was quantitatively and qualitatively assessed by a multidisciplinary team comprised of three social science researchers: Anne Bationo (ergonomist), Francesca Cozzolino (anthropologist) and Clara Meyer (ethnologist). The assessment focused on understanding the work’s impact on travelers. How did Ermont-Eaubonne station users interact with the work? How did Texel change the travel experience for these commuters? Anne Bationo and Francesca Cozzolino present the main results of their survey in their guided tours (see guided tour by A.Bationo or F.Cozzolino).

Launched in March 2014, the project is in keeping with the Mobile Lives Forum’s first research axis: Understanding. Mobile and immobile lives: how do we experience mobility today?

The project was conducted in partnership with EnsadLab, the research laboratory of the Ecole nationale supérieure des Arts Décoratifs, PSL Research University, Paris.



II. Key lessons from the train station experiment

The experiment at the train station aimed to measure the validity of the hypotheses formulated by the artists during the designing of Texel:

1. Station users will be intrigued and attracted by the work. They will stop during their commute to interact with it;
2. During this interaction, they will be able to experience a subjective relationship to time and question the typical, frenzied pace of daily travel;
3. They will have a positive experience;
4. The recurring nature of the experience will not detract from their interest in the device.

What did we learn from the investigation conducted during the experiment? Did Texel actually enrich the experience of time spent in the train station, and thus improve the quality of the trip? It would seem that Texel enabled some travelers to have a sensitive experience in the train station, when the conditions were conducive to the discovery of the work.

1) Home-to-work and home-to-school commutes: time constraints that don't allow people to deviate from their routines

At rush hour, especially in the morning, the density of people in the station corridors greatly limited commuters' ability to see the device, slow down and change directions. Most commuters' passed Texel without paying any attention to it, or simply glancing at it.

During their daily home to work commutes, suburban station users are too pressed for time. The interviews done with travelers showed that they were already caught up in the productive world of work, under time pressure and not very open to an artistic experience.

Texel is an interactive work. Unlike a fresco, a photograph or a piece of music, it cannot be fully understood unless the traveler approaches it, stops and takes the time to interact with it.

When merely observed, Texel was not viewed as a work of art; nor was the relationship between the movement of the hourglasses and that of passersby understood. Some commuters saw Texel as part of the functional world of the train station: they interpreted it as a signal to indicate the departure of a train, or a piece of furniture for recharging their mobile phone.

In such hurried moments, it appeared that even when the work caught users' attention, it was unlikely to make them deviate from their goal: to catch their train without wasting time.

2) At times when the pace was slower, Texel allowed commuters to have rare experiences at the train station

It is at times when the pressure dies down that daily routines can be deviated (e.g. during off-peak hours, exceptional trips or on the way home from work when people had a bit more time). At such times, some travelers took the time to slow down and get closer to Texel to discover the device. Often they had already spotted it during a previous trip, but hadn't stopped. Their exploration consisted in reading the explanatory plate presenting the work, walking in front of the hourglasses, raising their hands or legs to make the hourglasses pivot, or even improvising a dance. This sometimes gave rise to exchanges between travelers (looks, smiles, interjections, games, even group discussions). The presence of investigators on site seemed to fuel such exchanges, breaking with typical behavior in train stations.

Texel, it would seem, allowed commuters to have a pleasant experience, and to be more attentive to the station as a place and to other users. It also aroused memories, emotions and sensations – so many “bubbles of humanity,” as one station worker commented.

Commuters who took a brief moment to discover Texel made a symbolic link between the hourglasses and the notion of time. The work is a reference to the usual race for time in their daily commutes and thus fostered reflection on their relationship to time during this time.

In rare instances, some commuters actually experienced another relationship to time. During long interactions, rather than measuring time with a clock or watch it pass in one of the hourglasses, these commuters were preoccupied with filling it. The linear course of time was temporarily suspended in favor of the 'present moment' perceived at the individual scale. Texel thus gave rise to subjective experiences of time perception and a floating relationship to time wherein we forget that there's a train to catch, we're in a hurry and time is running out.

Thus, when conditions were favorable, certain travelers had an unusual experience at the train station thanks to Texel: they encountered an intriguing object, tried to understand how it worked and why it was there and had contact with other travelers they typically wouldn't talk to. It is then possible to take a step away from the hustle and bustle of daily travel and allow ourselves moments of reverie, memories and thought about our mobile lifestyles. In this respect, Texel enriches the travel experience and helps improve the quality of mobile lives.

III. Artistic Lab



Discover the project on our art-social sciences section :

Mobility

For the Mobile Lives Forum, mobility is understood as the process of how individuals travel across distances in order to deploy through time and space the activities that make up their lifestyles. These travel practices are embedded in socio-technical systems, produced by transport and communication industries and techniques, and by normative discourses on these practices, with considerable social, environmental and spatial impacts.

[En savoir plus x](#)

Movement

Movement is the crossing of space by people, objects, capital, ideas and other information. It is either oriented, and therefore occurs between an origin and one or more destinations, or it is more akin to the idea of simply wandering, with no real origin or destination.

[En savoir plus x](#)

Associated Thematics :

Lifestyles

- Alternative mobilities
- Change in practices
- Rhythms of everyday life

Theories

- Art & Science

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