Artwork

Kathleen McDermott: Urban Armor

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Urban Armor is an investigative series of wearable artworks designed to playfully address socio-political and technological issues arising in contemporary urban public space. Urban Armor offers a response to the commercial wearable technology craze that has spawned mass-produced devices with prescribed functions and limited amounts of customization. In contrast, Urban Armor consists of bespoke, open-source devices, tailored to the individual and their needs, (or whims). In addition to reimagining the relationship between the consumer and the technology they inhabit, the project also examines the way technology affects relationships and power dynamics in public and private spaces.

The Urban Armor pieces serve both as functioning wearable technologies and as symbolic objects of resistance. As cities grow evermore dense, public space is increasingly regulated and policed. These regulations include legal restrictions to human behaviour in public space, such as restrictions against sleeping on park benches, as well as technological restrictions, such as electronic "walk/don't walk" signs controlling pedestrian traffic patterns. The work is influenced by the idea that public space is also regulated in less apparent ways, by what Foucault deems, 'Technologies of Power' (Foucault, 1993: 203).

Tutorials for every piece, including detailed instructions, assembly photos and code, are uploaded to www.urbanamor.org, in an effort to encourage remote users to make their own devices. DIY technology enables users to subvert the limited consumer technology market and potentially make pieces which respond to any of the numerous individual factors that contribute to a person's experience of public space; such as age, gender, race, social class and personal history.

Urban Armor#1: The AutoFilter, Kathleen McDermott, 'Urban Armor', 2013.

The Auto Filter consists of a scarf fitted with motors and an unobtrusive pollution sensor near the wearer's mouth. When air pollution- such as cigarette smoke, alcohol vapors or car exhaust- is detected, the scarf automatically rises to cover the wearer's nose and mouth. The sudden, dramatic movement of the scarf exaggerates the wearer's own feelings of vulnerability and disgust in a way that is obviously visible to bystanders. Please watch the corresponding video here: http://urbanarmor.org/portfolio/the-autofilter/

Urban Armor#2: The Personal Space Dress, Kathleen McDermott, 'Urban Armor', 2014.

The Personal Space Dress uses sonar distance sensors to detect external presences near the dress. When a presence is detected too close to the wearer, several motors inside the dress are activated, deploying an umbrella-like structure that expands the dress and creates more space around the wearer. Please watch the corresponding video here: http://urbanarmor.org/portfolio/the-personal-space-dress/

Urban Armor #3: Miss-My-Face, Kathleen McDermott, 'Urban Armor', 2014.

Miss-My-Face uses a CCTV detector (which looks for wireless transmissions at select frequencies) to activate super-bright infrared lights on the wearer's clothing whenever a working CCTV camera is present. These lights are invisible to the naked eye, but in low light environments they are nearly blinding to CCTV cameras and render the wearer's face illegible. The image above is from CCTV footage and shows the device off (top) and on (bottom). Please view the video here: http://urbanarmor.org/portfolio/miss-my-face/

Sources:

Foucault, M. (1993). About the beginning of the hermeneutics of the self: Two lectures at Dartmouth. In Political Theory, 21, 2: 198-227