

Mongrel

## Mongrel Methods

Mongrel are a mixed group of artists that have been developing their approach to art, media and social engagement for over twenty years. Our approach to media is to set up a series of ways that allow it to become strange to people, to allow it to become a space of fun and experimentation, of expanded thoughts and actions. It is about releasing the full potential of media—allowing signals, things, objects, people and actions to pass freely between each other. It is about opening up the implicit meaning of media itself—to mediate not by controlling and ordering what can be said, shown or heard, but by providing the means to unblock channels of access, release currents of energy and reveal the margins of what people can feel, sense, reason and imagine.

Mongrel often makes work with and about marginalised peoples who are on low incomes, socially excluded and belong to cultural minorities. We do this by helping people to do things for themselves, creating social software and digital arts based projects that we then promote to a state of high visibility through our art world connections. We currently have projects running with the Congolese community in London, the Container Project in Jamaica and have helped groups in South African townships, the Sarai Centre in New Delhi and the Surinamer community of Amsterdam.



Mongrel/Harwood National Heritage, Ars Electronica 1999

### Media Systems

By “media systems” Mongrel do not just mean methods of communication that require you to read a 500 page manual and sign a 5 year maintenance contract. To understand this approach it is first necessary to decouple media systems (and especially “new media”) from new technology. A media system is simply some practice of encoding content in order to move it from one point to another. Sometimes media may mean a space at the railway station where people can exchange books and leave comments on ones they have already borrowed (“Book Crossings”). It may use readily available technological components but combine them in new ways such as to connect an international group of cultural spaces using basic streaming media to produce a collaborative music broadcast (“Skintstream” 2005, [www.mediashed.org/?q=skintstream](http://www.mediashed.org/?q=skintstream)). Or it could piggy back onto an existing network such as the public telephone exchange, but develop a new application to target a previously hard-to-reach community (“Telephone Trottoire” 2006, [www.mediashed.org/?q=trottoire](http://www.mediashed.org/?q=trottoire)).



MediaShed Projects

### The MediaShed and “Free Media”

Free media from the Mouth of the Thames  
The MediaShed is a Mongrel initiative arising out of their move to Southend-on-Sea in the Thames Estuary. Founded at the end of 2005, it is located in the Victoria Ward, one of the town’s target deprivation areas. The MediaShed hosts arts projects

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that provide members of the local community access to innovative informal ICT training, media production and distribution of local arts based activities. The MediaShed is the first “free media” space to open in the East of England and is located at the mouth of the Thames. It’s a place for doing art, making things or just saying what you want for little or no financial cost by using the public domain, free and open source software, recycled equipment and enthusiasm. It’s also a place to say what you want “freely”, using accessible media systems that can be taken apart and reused without unnecessary restrictions and controls.



### Video Sniffin’ a Free Media Project (2006)

*Video Sniffin’* was the first public project completed by the MediaShed. In 2006 Mediashed members began experimenting with *Video Sniffin’*, a term given to the practice of picking up the public signals being broadcast by wireless CCTV cameras. Young people from the local YMCA and others used a cheap video receiver from a high street store to “sniff” the streets for CCTV cameras.

“Everywhere we go today CCTV cameras are watching what we do and how we do it. They have become so common that we ignore their presence.”

“I found cheap receiver at Maplins (from a high street store) and plugged it straight into a video camera. It WORKED—got a signal”

“I’ll pop out on my bike Saturday and see what I can sniff”

“Got 24 hot spots”

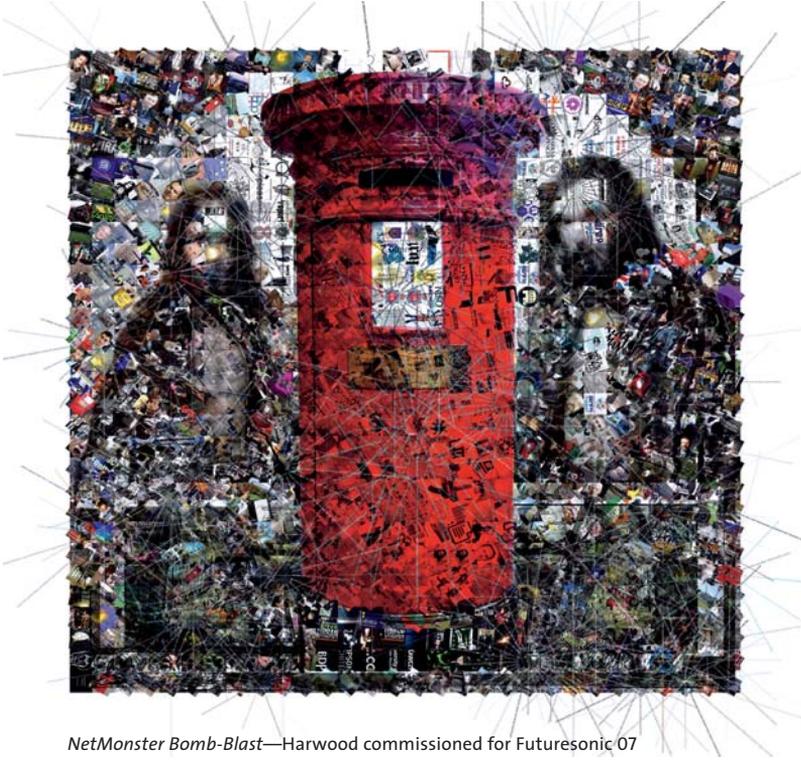
After finding 24 cameras they then asked shop owners if they could act out in front of them using homemade placards saying “CAN’T PAY”, “WON’T PAY” and record the footage. The shop owners were surprised and happy for the young people to make a film this way, but were also forced to reconsider the fact that we are under constant observation, something they had previously taken for granted. After the film several shop owners have since considered changing to hard-wired systems, while others spoke about repositioning their cameras.

### Netmonster: Bomb Blast and The Duellists—two Free Media Projects for Urban Spaces (2007)

In May 2007 Harwood<sup>1</sup> and MediaShed were commissioned by Futuresonic for “Art For Shopping Centres”, continuing the Manchester festival’s focus on taking artworks out of the galleries and into urban space. The commissions were to be placed in the Arndale Shopping Centre for 10 days.

*NetMonster* is a program designed to generate, edit and continuously update a composite image made up out of the results of Internet searches. It is like a “live” photomosaic puzzle in which the hundreds of individual images and texts that visually combine to make the big image can change depending on different search results.

For *NetMonster: Bomb Blast*, Harwood used his software to uncover forgotten connections in an



*NetMonster Bomb-Blast*—Harwood commissioned for Futuresonic 07

ever-evolving “network image” showing how the Arndale and Manchester city centre have risen from the ashes of the 1996 IRA bomb. Coinciding with the date Ian Paisley and Gerry Adams were scheduled to form an historic power-sharing government in Northern Ireland, this work revisited the legacy of the bomb blast, which famously detonated just a few meters away from the new Arndale Shopping Centre. Harwood went on to scrutinise the legacy of the 1996 destruction, which revealed that large areas of public space had become proprietary during the subsequent £600 million regeneration.

This laid the groundwork for the MediaShed’s popular intervention into the Arndale CCTV network. Under the direction of David Valentine, we decided to make a film called *The Duellists*, filmed using only the 250 camera in-house CCTV system. The film involved James Hall and Joe Livermore from the parkour breakin’ crew “Methods of Movement” with a sound track by Stuart Bowditch from Hybernation. Parkour involves fluid, uninterrupted movement, adapting motion to obstacles in the environment. This seemed the perfect way to re-imagine the propriety space of Arndale shopping centre, to allow it to become a space of fun and experimentation.

*The Duellists* was also the first implementation of *gearbox.mediashed.org*—a collaboration between Eyebeam Studios, New York and MediaShed to create a “free media video toolkit”.

[www.mongrel.org.uk](http://www.mongrel.org.uk)  
[www.mediashed.org](http://www.mediashed.org)

1 Harwood is the artistic director of the UK artist group Mongrel.