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## DIGITAL IDENTITIES SELF NARRATIVES

Marco Cadioli  
Square with concentric circles #64 (2013)



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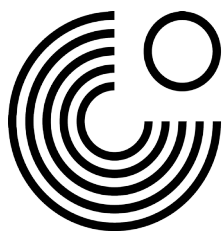
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# MANIFESTO

Since 2005, Digicult is one of the main online platform that examines the impact of digital technologies and science on art, design, culture and contemporary society. Based on an international Network of critics, curators, artists, designers, professors, researchers, journalists, media center, galleries and festival, Digicult is an editorial project that daily publish news, informations, articles, interviews, reports and even essays, artists' book and the Digimag Journal through its online publishing service Digicult Editions.

Digimag Journal is an interdisciplinary online publication seeking high-standard articles and reviews that focus on the impact of the last technological and scientific developments on art, design, communication and creativity. Following the former Digimag Magazine (72 issues in 7 years), it is based on international call for papers on given subjects and provides readers with comprehensive accounts of the latest advancements in the international digital art and culture scene.

Digimag was born as a monthly magazine and published 72 issues in over 7 years. It provided readers with comprehensive accounts of the latest advancements in the international digital art scene and culture. The magazine evolved year after year, issue after issue, morphing into a hybrid instrument able to reflect the complexity of contemporary artistic and cultural production. It quickly became a cultural instrument, a tool for academics, researchers, students, artists, designers, geeks and practitioners connected to the main international media centers, universities, contemporary art galleries, digital art festivals and hacktivist networks.

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Digicult Editions has now 4 different book series: Networks (Internet, Networks, IT), (h)activism (social and political impact of technologies), Arts and Sounds (more strictly visual and/or sound art), Rhizomes (genres' intersection) and Digital narratives (new narrative formats: literature, gaming etc).

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# DIGITAL IDENTITIES SELF NARRATIVES

Identity is becoming a fluid concept, encompassing different domains of the self. How are identities affected by technology and digital tools? What is the role of art in shaping this notion

One of the most interesting aspects of our relationship with technology is the way we relate to other people and create new identity narratives through it. Internet, social networks and p2p tools have amplified this phenomenon, enabling the ramification of larger networks built around individuals. As a consequence, personal narratives are linked to virtual (and real) dimensions of social, economic and artistic fields. Digital identity becomes, therefore, the individual unit of a larger digital culture environment.

This subject has been widely studied in Streaming Egos, the pioneering international project by Goethe Institut (<http://blog.goethe.de/streamingegos/>) which involved five different European countries through the production of an online platform, some critical texts, a convention, commissioned artworks and a final catalogue. The aim of the project was to study how Internet, social networks and, more in general, technologies are modelling the way we relate to others and to the external world, both conceived not simply as biological systems, but also as virtual entities telling their own stories.

“Who am I?” is a primordial existential question, with different connotations depending on the context (social, political or cultural). “Who do I want (or: do I have) to be?” is questioning the very basis of economy, ethics, theology and politics, especially in its collective meaning “Who are we?”

The act of transforming and reinventing the concept of ourselves and, consequently, the idea of community is at the very basis of identity explorations in the digital era. Identity becomes a fluid concept, encompassing different domains of the self. How are identities affected by technology and digital tools? What is the role of art in shaping this notion?

When interacting with other people on the Net, individuals reflect more and more on themselves, carefully choosing contents (whether personal or not) to be shared (and seen by others). This leads to a self-discourse redefining the notions of identity, repetition and difference .





Alessio Chierico, "[e-Book] Intellectual Property - A Reference Handbook", photo by Alessio Chierico

# THE REPRESENTATION OF SELF IN DIGITAL LIFE

## Digital ontology for digital identity

by Alessio Chierico

### 1 Introduction

As extensively debated, nowadays it is possible to recognize that digital is an essential substance that constitutes the basis of our cultural production as well as virtual identity. In fact, virtual identity should not be seen exclusively as a proliferation of the self in social networks in form of profile or avatar. Instead, it lies in the very deep substance of digital: the fact that every

person is translated from the physics of oxygen and carbon to the physics of electron, and the logic of bits. For this reason become necessary to question what the digital is. Thus, it becomes necessary to entail an ontological perspective toward digital. The research presented here combines the idea of digital identity with digital ontology. Exposing issues like visual representation and materiality, it aims to provide the conceptual tools for an under-

standing of the digital nature.

### 2 Digital Ontology

Firstly, referring to digital ontology, it is important to clarify that this term defines two very different fields, that must be distinguished, in order to avoid any confusion. This term is often used in "digital physics" for identifying a hypothetical cosmology which believes that the whole universe is de-





scribable with discrete values, therefore everything: time, space, every entity and process is computable. Taking a deterministic perspective, digital ontology relies upon the idea that universe is modelled by integer values, and that its evolution is just the output of an algorithm. These theories date back to 1967 when the computer pioneer Konrad Zuse wrote the book *Calculating Space* (Zuse 1970), which poses the bases of digital ontology in digital physics.

In these theories, results particularly interesting the concept of computability of the phenomenological world: the possibility to describe, translate, and atomise aspects of reality in binary form. These specific potentials become popularised by the argumentations of Nicholas Negroponte, especially from his book *Being Digital* (Negroponte 2001). With a notably different perspective than digital physics, Negroponte related atoms to bits.

Accordingly, the atoms that compose the physical reality, can be conceptually translated with bits in the digital realm. In this sense, Negroponte predicted that all forms of information made by atoms are destined to become digital. If digital physics pretends to be a descriptive model of universal physics, Negroponte proposes an opposite vision, in which digital is not seen as a cosmological system which composes the reality, but as a system based on minimal units, which are technically able to reproduce any kind of information which is presented by the empirical reality.

### 2.1 Digital ontology for digital identity and cultural production

Digital is becoming each time more predominant in any moment of human experience. Digital ontology do

not just regard digital as a new potential substance of former material artefacts, but it is seen as an unifying element which determines all the cultural production, as well as the human identity itself. As figured out by Marshall McLuhan, already in 1964: "In this electric age we see ourselves being translated more and more into the form of information, moving toward the technological extension of consciousness". (McLuhan 1994: 57) Nowadays the intuition of McLuhan matured in the extremes consequences brought by digital technologies. According to Aden Evens:

The digital has an ontology, a way of being, and products and processes generated through digital technologies bear traces of this way of being. [...] The hallmark of the digital is to render abstraction materially operative, to bring abstraction into the concrete without it ceasing to be abstract. Primarily by incorporating abstraction, the people, objects, and events of digital culture connect to and engage with the digital technologies at the heart of that culture (Evens 2012).

Digital is an essential substance which flows deep in the structures of cultural production. For this reason, it is necessary to acknowledge its nature, to find some remote structures of culture and identity. Since it becomes obvious that the advent of digital influenced our culture, seems necessary to question: what is digital? This question brings us directly to the core of digital ontology: a research on the essence, on the nature, and on the forms of digital. It is here believed that one of the possible answers to the previous question, can be found in the way digital performs the transcription from the analogue world. With the intent of exposing the ontology of digital, a particular hint emerges when digital is related to its representational

qualities. For instance, the ontological concerns that are connected to the translation of analogue contents into digital formats.

Digital ontology opens questions of various kind. One of these suggests to rethink the idea of intellectual property, according to the possibilities that digital offers, and the limitations which it is subject. The process of "remediation", as it was identified by Bolter and Grusin: a kind of Darwinian evolution in which media absorbs, translate and integrate between themselves in a sort of competition (Bolter and Grusin 2002), together with the advent of digital technologies, envision the emergence of a particular issue. Assuming that digital is a meta-medium: it crosses transversally any medium, changing the "material" of their "skeleton" with digital code (Manovich 2009), the remediation it performs is able to recreate fluidly any form or content with same, or similar degree of fidelity of its original. In other terms, if the appearance of the digital version of a content/artefact is the same then its original form, it does not mean that its essence remained unaltered, thus it cannot be submitted to the same restrictions. For instance, if we consider the physical space that was necessary for containing all the books of a library, it is easy to notice that, in comparison with their corresponding digital version, the physical space become accessory, or at least irrelevant.

### 2.2 The vacuity of the content in the digital domain

Intellectual property is a concept that ignores the medium which is used to host its contents. For instance, a writer holds the intellectual property of his text, in any of the forms in which it can be recorded: engraved in a stone,



written on paper, or on a digital file. In all these forms, the intellectual property remain in equal measure, because it is completely independent from its support. However, when an artefact is transcribed in digital/informational form, its objective essence is composed of numerical code, and it cannot be subject to the same regulations of intellectual property, as it is in its intelligible form. In other words, if we transcribe the numerical code that composes a text covered by intellectual property, in a way that its visible

representation is not the text itself, by just its code, can the result of this process be considered a copyright violation? Moreover, can this code be still considered as a product of the writer? Does it maintain its authorship?

These questions motivate the development of the project [e-Book] Intellectual Property - A Reference Handbook. This work, made in 2011, consists of a pirate copy of the book Intellectual Property - A Reference Handbook, which text has been decoded in hexadecimal code and prin-

ted in a paper book (Lorusso 2015). Ironically, the book chosen for this project is clearly referring to the intellectual property. The content of this printed book presents unreadable pages of hexadecimal code, that technically correspond to the original text. Indeed, copying all the code of this book, and converting it to ASCII, the original text will appear again. This project raises a question about authenticity: is the original text more real than its numerical representation? Intellectual property as well as many other aspects of cultural production, are habits, historically determined by past media and technologies, which are still reiterated in our contemporaneity. However, it is here believed that these aspects, even if they are understandable, should be re-discussed, according to the ontological issues that emerged with the advent of digital technologies.

### 2.3 Forms of digital

Digital ontology and its main issues, are the primary topics which are reflected in all the projects that are presented in here. nOne and three chairs a project developed by the author in 2008, investigates the conception of digital form. This work, presented as installation, is a reenactment of one of the most important artworks of conceptual art: One and three chairs by Joseph Kosuth, remade according to the questions raised by digital, about its essence (Mesrie 2015). Methodologically, nOne and three chairs, as well as its inspirational work made by Kosuth, proposes a conceptual logic, which considers the artistic practice as a semantic tool.

The original One and three chairs, made in 1965, was a composition of three different forms in which a chair can be represented. One real chair was



Alessio Chierico, "nOne and three chairs", photo by Alessio Chierico





Alessio Chierico, "Hidden Nude", photo by Alessio Chierico

placed to one of the exhibition walls, to its right, there was a text with the definition of the word "chair" taken from a dictionary, in its left there was a photographic print, in real scale, of that same physical chair. With this work, Kosuth created a tautology which meant to exemplify how the idea of the chair can be decomposed in: its plastic materiality, its theoretical definition, and its visual representation. This process shows that none of the three elements is more real than the others, they are all different views of the same thing.

This work highlighted the foundational participation of language in the definition of reality, and the conceptual value as a connective tool to create meanings. It is the Plato's theory of forms which reminds Kosuth that the idea is the cause of any material production (Goldie and Schellekens 2009). Thus, the essence of art can be encountered and reduced to its pure concept. This aspect assumes a relevant value when we acknowledge that digital has the same level of the immateriality of ideas. From this reflection came out nOne and three chairs, which tautology assumes the same function proposed by the work of Kosuth, but it focuses on the ontological specificities of digital.

In this project, the three chairs are here substituted by three digital chairs: the real chair is replaced by a digital print of a chair, the definition from the dictionary is replaced by the digital code that drawn the chair, and the photograph of

the chair is replaced with a computer and a screen which shows a digital representation of the chair. As reported by the title, all these three elements correspond to the same or none thing. All chairs are at the same ontological level, they are real in the same way, but, meanwhile there is no actual chair to represent itself. Digital is an abstraction which emancipates its form from the necessity of having any referent. Thus, digital must be intended as a self-referential entity, its own way of relating to the chair (or idea of a chair) does not pretend any relationship with the chair itself. This demonstrates that the chair becomes both meta-representation and an autonomous element.

## 2.4 Digital materiality for an ontology of digital

Form and material have always been central to the discussion about the ontology of things. Indeed, materiality presents precious insights to address the research of digital ontology. First of all, this discussion must acknowledge the research of Friedrich Kittler, which is based on the principle that every act of communication has its physical expression. In this sense, even actions like handwriting conserve the fingerprints left by the bodily engagement of the writer, with the materiality of pen and paper (Kittler 1990: 83-4). For investigative or juridical needs, the forensic analysis takes into account all these material aspects of media,

in the production of their contents: for example, the handwriting forensic. For this reason, with the intention of understanding and analysing the digital essence, Matthew Kirschenbaum proposes to assume a “forensic imagination” (Kirschenbaum 2008). In his opinion, the forensic analysis used to find traces of digital presence in computational systems, can be used to expose the deep material nature of digital, which unfold in form of: grooves in optical disks, electric impulses, or in magnetic recordings, etc. (Kirschenbaum 2008: 2-3). Digital is not immaterial, as commonly considered, it has its own specific and dynamic materialities. Certainly, the flexibility of digital derives from its logical computability, but this should not hide its dependence on physics. Moreover, the deep nature of digital, in its microscopic scale, leaves traces, fingerprints which determine the aesthetic specificities of its contents, and it exposes the mechanism of the system (Drucker 2013).

### 3 Ontology of digital image

As previously said, the material of digital can be seen in form of electric impulse, and in any other physical manifestation of its presence. However, it is also important to acknowledge that also the materiality of the devices that control and contain digital, needs a special attention. The graphic representation, for instance, is subject to the constraints of digital bits as well as to the constraints of screening devices. In fact, accordingly to Huhtamo: “The history of the screen fluctuates between the imagination and the world of things. As gateways to displaying and exchanging information, screens are situated in the liminal zone between the material and the immaterial, the real and the vir-

tual” (Huhtamo 2004: 4).

From an ontological perspective, the objectuality of screens raises questions about the relation between “represented” and “representation”: the subject and its digital depiction, but also the digital subject and its physical manifestation. This last perspective is faced by the artistic practices which are defined as Post-Internet and Post-Digital art. In fact, the works which express this kind of research, disseminate classical digital aesthetics as objects in the physical world.

#### 3.1 Digital visual representation and its referent

One large discussion that involves the digital image and its representational capabilities, concentrates its attention on digital photography, especially the problematic about the loss of referent. It is commonly supported the idea which believes that analogue photography guarantees that the image impressed on film, is the result of an actual presence and existence of the subjects in the picture. This argument was deeply argued by the semiotician Roland Barthes with the following statement: “I call “photographic referent” not the optionally real thing to which an image or a sign refers but the necessarily real thing which has been placed before the lens, without which there would be no photograph” (Barthes 1982: 76). Since light is directly responsible of the chemical reaction on film, any object which emanates or filters light, manifests its physicality, its (reproducible) *hic et nunc*, in Benjamin terms. It offers an undeniable proof of his presence, even when it is used to create abstract im-

ages.

In digital photography the film is substituted by sensors which react to light, identifying in discrete values, the image that the light brings whit itself. The most concrete difference between analogue and digital photography, is given by the step in which the values detected by the sensor are translated in digital form, becoming totally alienated and abstract.

The suspicion aroused about digital emerges considering that: the values of the image enter the domain of abstraction. Thus, a manipulated or digitally generated image, is not less real than the one that supposes to be a registration of reality. In facts

Stephen Mayes, acknowledging the technical revolution of photography, states that: commonly, two third of a digital photograph is determined by interpolations made by the software, instead than being an optical record of light (Mayes 2015).

In this sense, Mayes questions the authenticity of the digital picture. Since the consumers are subjects to the trends of certain kind of visual aesthetics, the producer needs to create tools of automatic manipulation for the creation of the picture by software, independently from the fidelity of the raw data captured by the camera (Mayes 2015). In a certain sense, digital photography steps back to the same representational level of painting, a continuous movement toward what Barthes called “chimeras”: representations without the objective referent of analogue photography. Using his words:

Painting can feign reality without having seen it. Discourse combines

**DIGITAL IS NOT  
IMMATERIAL,  
AS COMMONLY  
CONSIDERED, IT HAS  
ITS OWN SPECIFIC  
AND DYNAMIC  
MATERIALITIES**







Alessio Chierico, "Self-Portrait", photo by Alessio Chierico

signs which have referents, of course, but these referents can be and are most often "chimeras." Contrary to these imitations, in Photography I can never deny that the thing has been there (Barthes 1982 :76).

Another analogy which elapses between painting and digital photography, can be found in the historical shift that was triggered by invention of perspective. As theorised by Ernst Hans Josef Gombrich of advent of visual perspective in art, determined a different approach toward the needs of art. Since the early visual representations made by the human being, the author intended to depict his knowledge about the subject of his picture. After the advent of perspective (or immediately earlier, Giotto for instance) the artist started to depict what he "sees" (Gombrich 1960).

Digital photography permits a large freedom in the formulation of the representation, and since the referent of the picture is no more the indiscern-

ible evidence of "reality", photography changed its original function. Like the shift provoked by perspective, digital photography is provoking an opposite trend.

Computational photography draws on all these resources and allows the visual image to create a picture of reality that is infinitely richer than a simple visual record, and with this comes the opportunity to incorporate deeper levels of knowledge. It won't be long before photographers are making images of what they know, rather than only what they see (Mayes 2015).

However, it is important to notice that analogues photography was not immune to abstraction, as well as digital, it could be easily manipulated. Moreover, the whole technical apparatus and the process of developing the picture, was participating to the constitution and definition of the image. Thus, it is naive to believe that analogue photography, or photography

in general, can be considered as objective registration of reality, and not just as a possible manifestation of it, marked by the apparatus that depicts it, and the perception of the viewer. Nevertheless, digital ontology serves our discussion for opening several considerations about contemporaneity. Because, as Evens stated:

The signature of the digital is not so much a matter of which choices get made, as the digital is prepared to admit any domain in which choice takes place. Thus it does not color its products in a particular shade [...] But it does shape the way that colors are chosen, the kinds of choices that are available, and most of all, the very fact of choice as the basic maneuver of aesthetics, ethics, and cultural production more generally" (Evens, 2012).

This is why an artistic research which digs in digital ontology has been necessary step for developing an intent that aims to reveal the mechanism of technology, and the politics embedded

into them.

### 3.2 Computational photography: representation or abstraction?

Nowadays, the issues related to representation and mystification of images become extremely complex. Since imaging technologies moved into the digital domain, there are many new agents that influence both the image capturing process, and the image codification/decodification (construction/reconstruction). With these new technologies, the process of representation is increasingly shifting from hardware to software. Sophisticated algorithms are in charge to recreate the picture, according to aesthetic values which point to attractiveness. For instance, we can take into account the photographs made with smartphones: despite the great achievement in reducing the hardware size, keeping a decent quality of their cameras, the raw image they can produce is technically very poor, plenty of noise and aberrations. For this reason, there are algorithms that beautify the image, covering and exploiting the aberrations, in order to achieve seductive images, which are entirely rebuilt and very distant from their original raw form. The image processed by these algorithms maintains very few information about the scene depicted, in comparison to its modest original version. In this circumstances, the issue related to the referent of digital images achieve its extreme point. Nowadays, the developments of computer vision, thanks to the use of techniques of machine learning and deep learning, foreshadows the advent of increasingly radical revolution in photography. The term “photography” itself, is losing its etymological meaning. Originally this word literally means: drawing with light, now, in computational photography the act of drawing is not

depending much on light, but it depends on in algorithmic constructions and interpretations.

For example, we can consider a recent research in which a group of scientists demonstrated to be able to reconstruct the portrait of a person, starting from a handmade drawing. In few words, a deep neural network was trained to recognise realistic handmade drawings (originally made by copying a photo), and to improve their quality, reaching an almost photorealistic fidelity to the original (Güçlütürk et al. 2016).

### 3.3 Identity in digital image

Previously we saw that the referent in photography is increasingly becoming unnecessary. What does this means when the image of a person, that we consider undoubtedly as a distinctive element of his recognition and identity, is subject to the ephemerality of the computational image? Since the loss of the referent of the picture is a lost of any evidence of the existence and appearance of its subject, the image of a person become pure abstraction. It is unable to express any substantial identity, or in better terms, the identity itself become incorporated and translated into the code of the digital picture: the unique objective element of the representation. In our age, Narcissus would see his image on a screen, as result of the elaboration of a camera, instead then seeing his reflection in a pool. In this case, digital, like water, is the material that realise the fiction of the image, and that determines the impossibility to reach its real subject.

As discussed before, digital image and digital photography are subjects that embody the discrepancy between digital representation and its numerical essence. Since the referent of the digital picture can be absolutely aleat-

ory, also the image itself can alienate the referent from its true appearance. This issue inspired two works: *Hidden Nude* and *Self-Portrait*, both made by the author in 2007. The topic of these projects relates to the ontological problem of digital representation, looking at the human figure, his body, thus his identity. Nowadays, we are accustomed to the representation of our self in the digital realm: our avatars, our web profiles, our memories, and our pictures and selfie, but what actually is the picture that depicts us?

*Hidden Nude* is a print of the hexadecimal code which composes a nude picture of the author. The real image disappears, and the code takes its place. The nude picture becomes self-censored by the same code that constitutes it. The nudity is hidden, because nature of digital does not have any relevant attachment with the referent of the image. The photographic translation to digital, decomposes, dematerializes, and decontextualizes the body, and its physical nature. Nevertheless, the code can be converted again in its original form. Thus, copying all the code contained in *Hidden Nude*, and translating it into digital image, the original picture will appear again.

Similarly, *Self-Portrait* illustrates how the representation of the self gets lost when the image becomes digital. This work consists in a photographic portrait of the author, which was converted to hexadecimal code and printed, following the common proportions of painted portraits. *Self-Portrait* aims to recall the painting tradition, to create an ironical connection, that imagines the format of classical painting confronting the numerical essence of digital. Symbolically, this aspect is supported by the frame used. It reiterates the paradigms of classical art, legitima



ting the status of art as recipient for its contents.

It is interesting to notice that in both *Hidden Nude* and *Self-Portrait* the dimension occupied by the code is much more larger than the effective dimension of the original images. According to the quality and dimension of the digital images, the code increase exponentially and to be represented in its printed form, it requires very large physical supports. In order to reduce the quantity of code, to fit into the chosen format for the print, here the images has been reduced and extremely compressed. Again, this is another manifestation of the problem of the referent in digital ontology.

### 3.4 Representation and politics of obfuscation

The understanding of digital, is subject to the ontologies that are built over it. Any semantic layer placed by the interfaces, over the essential numeric nature of digital, imposes arbitrary meanings. As defined by Johanna Drucker: "Ontologies are ideologies, through and through, as naming, ordering, and parameterizing are interpretative acts that enact their view of knowledge, reality, and experience and give it form" (Drucker 2013). The fluidity of digital allows producers, to build any kind of ontology and meaning embedded into the objects. This is done in order to support the ideologies/visions of the industries, by producing signifiers as products. This happens in various cultural areas, thus in various segments of digital production. Anyway if we consider again the peculiarities of computational digital photography, we can associate the forms of obfuscation of digital with the forms of obfuscation in politics.

The artist Hito Steyerl acknowledges

that our current imaging technologies are more based in the interpretative function of the software, then in the light reflection of the subject (photographic referent). Thus, the representation is becoming increasingly a higher form of abstraction and obfuscation. Steyerl feels that this process suggests a parallelism between the representation in digital image, and the functioning of representation concept in democratic politics. Using her words:

The representational paradigm assumes that you vote for someone who will represent you. Thus the interests of the population will be proportionally represented. But current democracies work rather like smartphone photography by algorithmically clearing the noise and boosting some data over other (Stayer in Jordan 2014).

In other terms, the aesthetic distortion that elapses between the subject and its algorithmic depiction, corresponds to the distortion that elapses between the democratic system and its mediated conception. The condition of our mediascape, still dominated by pictures, reflects perfectly the functioning of democratic systems.

### 4 Conclusions

Concluding, we saw how an enquiry of digital ontology is necessary to acquire a deep understanding of the basic substance of most of the current cultural production. The domain of digital it is not confined in its electronic circuits, but it is the essential fluid that flows in any segment of everyday life.

Accordingly to Aden Evens, we cannot consider digital just as computational logic circumscribed by the hardware of the machine. Differently "not only our artefacts but our bodies, our schedules, our habits of cognition, our ways of being by ourselves and with others are now thoroughly informed

by the digital" (Evens 2012).

Paraphrasing the seminal book of social psychology *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* by Erving Goffman, it was here questioned the issues that incur in "the representation of self in digital life". This argument, used digital ontology to clarify the essence of computational image, and to exposes forms of mystification of contents, and their political potential. Goffman acknowledged the existence of a "front region" as a stage where people performs their masks in social contexts, and a "back region" where the people are facing their own inner nature and personality (Goffman 1956: 66-86). In our terms, the "front region" correspond to the mimic intent of representation. The presumption that representation is a copy of visual reality, instead then its abstract surrogate. At the contrary "back region" is the truly essence that lies on electric impulses and Boolean logic. When our identity is described and informed by digital, it is also purely reduced to this minimal essence.

■ ALESSIO CHIERICO



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## ALESSIO CHIERICO

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# THE MUTANT CUTE: MEITU, THE SELFIE, AND THE REWRITING OF GLOBAL IDENTITIES

by Patrick Lichty

Horror of the Gaze, After Michael Mandiberg, 2017



In technologically-enabled society, the selfie has become the intersection between digital narcissism and fungible identity. Famous images of throngs with their backs to famous paintings and presidential candidates underscore the necessity for proving one's existence through tagging the moment with the photographer's face. However, with the rise of "augmentation" (AR-based props and 'beautification') through programs like Snapchat, Meitu and FaceApp that add props, "cutify", and gender swap, heterogeneous issues of identity politics are made evident. What are the issues relating to "beautifying", whitening, gender swapping, and augmenting the self-portrait, and what are the lines between self-imposition of these roles and the inscription of agendas by capital and disparate cultural norms?

Somewhere between 2015 and 2016 my interest in digital processes and Augmented Reality had turned to filters and overlays in phone apps. I even saw noted curators and artists posting Snapchat overlays to their feeds since 2015, which began my interest in what I call the augmented selfie. From this, I did numerous experiments with these apps until I came upon a conversation on Facebook. In late 2016, I came upon a Facebook conversation between Rhizome Art Director Michael Connor and NYC-based cultural theorist Nora Khan discussing identity politics, with a picture of herself. From my standpoint, seeing a Pakistani-American (admittedly she was doing it critically in the thread) feed herself through algorithmic "Cutifying" and whitening through a Chinese beautification app that has entirely different cultural politics left me breathless. This simple gesture made visible the proposition of postinternet social conditions supposedly draining any subject of meaning that I wanted to explore this process through a number of methods. These would form the body of my work, *Horror of the Gaze*. This would "Cutify" a body of pirated Facebook portraits, notable historical portrait-based art, and the beautification of dictators in an attempted semiotic swap. This process revealed intercultural, identity, art historical, and political issues that as an American, white, middle-aged, cisgender male, challenge my position greatly, and I disclaim that position as one of honest analysis and inquiry that I humbly present to the public.

Upon doing a few experiments after the Khan/Connor conversation I decided to create *The Horror of the Gaze*, in which I used Meitu to "cutify" nearly 100 artists, scholars and

curators from around the world. As these "Cute" versions of my community began to circulate, questions of privacy, control of personal images, colonialism, and the politics of "whiteness" began to arise. In discussing these issues in my own Facebook feed, I was reminded of the work of Sianne Ngai. In *Our Aesthetic Categories*, Ngai discusses the mediation of the "Zany", "Cute", and "Interesting" as obfuscating affective issues of hypercommodification, colonialization, and stereotyping. Each obscures hidden agendas of objectification and hidden anger. "Cuteness" is often a scrim for other, darker agendas with the Japanese artist Takeshi Murakami, whose smiling "Mr. DOB" is a post-nuclear nationalistic reappropriation of Mickey Mouse. In the case of Meitu, it is a double signifier for the Asian perception of paleness, and cuteness, which are distinctly different from the Western perceptions of the aesthetics used in the app (paleness, large, watering eyes, pronounced lips). It is important to consider the conflation of racial and cultural tropes in play by the use of these apps. How does one culture's digital selfie filters map onto others?

### HOW DOES ONE CULTURE'S DIGITAL SELFIE FILTERS MAP ONTO OTHERS?

Gayatri Spivak, in the *Translation Studies Reader*, states that accuracy in translation requires affect for the subject, and do these modes of production have these qualities. And if McLuhan's adage of the medium being the message is true, what can we ascertain is being said by Meitu remediations of cultural identity? With Meitu, of course there is no affect; this is a "cutification" app created within an hypercapitalist authoritarian society that has been criticized for its aggressive personal data harvesting (but Meitu does arguably no more so than Facebook). The emergence of this app in Western spheres of influence conflates so many cultural tropes. Some of the notions in play are the Anime-fication of the head to match large eyes and infantile head structure as in Japanese and Korean animation. The idea of *kawaii* or the Japanese notion of cute comes from a mix of infantilization and large eyes, etc, popularized by Isamu Tezuka from inspiration of Western animators like Walt Disney, and his seminal piece, *Steamboat Willie*. Also in play is the East Asian notion of paleness/fairness of complexion, as well as the East Asian "kawaii" cultural practice of popular photo sticker and selfie culture.

Laura Mulvey in her seminal essay, *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, constructed the notion of the male gaze and the objectification of the female body in cinematic space. However, when we are confronted with the operator and the subject being one and the same, what are the semiotics







Dictator Series: Donald Trump, 2017

of the post cinematic, knowing that such a proposition is a book in itself? I would propose that in the case of Meitu, it is the technological apparatus and panopticon of international neoliberal capital, ostensibly male, that operates the gaze. But in this case, the hegemonic force might be more systemic, and the gaze is a self-reflexive machine gaze shaped by the corporate agendas of Meitu's parent company, and perhaps even the Chinese government? The Post-Cinematic gaze here, being centered on the cute, operates on somewhat different terms.

The most enriching conversation came from the Meituification of Dutch artist and theorist Rosa Menkman, who objected to the unauthorized detournement of her image and imposition of Meitu's rules. Although the conversation problematizing ownership, agency, and personal colonization by others certainly ranged from the nature of the work to those of Facebook owning user content, something else arose. The idea of a white cisgender American Male imposing a Cutification program on an already white Dutch female, making her whiter, and imposing an alien

beauty protocol caused me to wonder about whiteness and the notion of the "cute".

**BUT MORE  
IMPORTANTLY, IN  
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THE DARKER PEOPLE  
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WHITENESS**

Asian notions of whiteness, according to Kepnes, are not historically linked to race in the Western sense, but more closely to matters of class or caste. In Thailand, there is a creation story of people being cooked too little or too much, and those who are lightly colored and cooked "Just Right". But more importantly, in Southeast Asia, the darker people were the poor; they were the ones who had to work

in the field while the gentry retained whiteness. The East Asian notion of whiteness also maps into Southeast Asian practice of using whitening creams and the attitudes surrounding them, a recent example being a Seoul Secret ad in Thailand saying, "Just being white, you will win." One key difference in regards to the difference between Occidental and Oriental notions of race versus class, or even caste. And especially in China, perhaps this is expressed in the fact that the person who can "look" white can afford the technology for them to augment themselves to appear so. This is very different than the construction of race in the West. Race as a discourse emerged in large part through the work of naturalist Johann Friedrich Blumenbach. His seminal book, *On the Natural Variety of Mankind*, is the seed for Western racial identity politics where he codified physiological differences and matters like beauty in terms of the natural development of the human species. The book would create scientific rationales for racial superiority, European colonialism, Rudolf Steiner's theories on the spiritual development of humanity by race, eugenics, and even the Holocaust. His passage regarding the physical nature of the Georgian people, and his thought that all other races devolved from their perfect whiteness, hints at the core of Western white supremacy and colonialism. In the colonized world, the ideas of race, fitness and control would arbitrarily be passed on those in power, such as the Belgians' creation of the myths between the Hutus and Tsut-sis in Rwanda, eventually leading to that genocide. Therefore, although all global rationales for assigning superiority through color is unjust, the social context for each appear to be highly different.





Horror of the Gaze: Rosa Menkman, 2017

The steps after the initial Horror series took different critical methods to look at the nature of meaning and colonization of the gaze under different regimes. Does, as it has been argued by Provan, internet culture drain the meaning from everything? My next steps were to map “Cute” selfie culture onto classic portrait-based art, such as Sherrie Levine’s *After Walker Evans*, Steve McCurry’s photo of Afghan refugee Sharbat Gula, and a classic photo of Frida Kahlo.

In asking, had the technology would have existed, would the subjects have subjected themselves to this sort of fil-

tering, created vastly different results. The starkest transformation was *After Walker Evans* in that the black and white photo was colorized, the abject woman of the American Depression was given lipstick, blue eyes and placed in an angelic situation, inferring a sense of peace. The famous Kahlo photo, seemed the most believable as a person with some agency who might have seemed possible to do such a thing. Of the three, the Gula photo, due to its context, was most supportive of the turn towards meaninglessness as it did take a powerful moment in time and drain its semiotic value. The third series took famous dictators and put them through that visual regime – the result was to make Stalin

into a mere meme. In my opinion, a logical extension would have been to take other symbols of evil and cutify them, and this quickly became a banal exercise.

In regards to “cuteness”, Ngai writes about the infantilization of the subject, as the Anime character’s head typically is more V-shaped like a baby, with larger eyes. This infantilization establishes a power relation of loving condescension to the “cutified” subject, even if to put it in a parent/child relationship so that we identify more closely with the subject of the photo. This was certainly the case with the portraiture and classic dictator (Stalin/Hitler) pieces.

For the Karachi Art Summit, I suggested an intervention called “Make Karachi Cute Again.” It was a play on the Trump slogan, “Make America Great Again”, as I felt I was coming into this event as yet another proscriptive American, coming to tell the Pakistanis “something” from my position. Through framing the project in this fashion, I was ironically suggesting that Karachi was somehow “not cute” and we needed to “restore its cuteness” (if such an enterprise was ever needed). And also, with Pakistan being in a roughly central Occidental/Oriental cultural position, I was curious about the responses, I would get to the project. Although the representational issues were deemed questionably problematic for Karachi, a few selfies that I obtained from Facebook visitors to my other installation, *Draw the Karachi Internet*, created near-Bollywood scenarios, which wasn’t altogether unexpected. Of interest here was that Meitu seemed to create a gestalt that was culturally distinct from my study of Chinese and European subjects. Although this



Example: Matt Rappoport After Cutification

particular project might not be appropriate as a cultural barometer, would anyone respond to radically different situations, like the obviously absurd, “Make Pyongyang Cute Again”?

This is a “postcard” from a body of work in progress, as of this point in time, programs like Meitu embed and reveal cultural stereotypes and normative positions that create odd mappings across cultures. The Horror of the Gaze, in looking back into machine regimes such as Meitu, explores differing level of affect through contextualizing augmentation of the selfie in wildly different contexts. Taken out of the everyday frame, selfie augmentation software mutates the subject, bending semiotic relations between regional identity politics, objectification of the subject/self, personal control, and corporate agendas/marketing. All of these issues are endemic if the postinternet condition, and programs like Meitu lay bare the social face of the networked self

## ■ PATRICK LICHTY

### PATRICK LICHTY

PATRICK LICHTY (B.1962) IS A TECHNOLOGICALLY-BASED CONCEPTUAL ARTIST, WRITER, INDEPENDENT CURATOR, ANIMATOR FOR THE ACTIVIST GROUP, THE YES MEN, AND EXECUTIVE EDITOR OF INTELLIGENT AGENT MAGAZINE. HE BEGAN SHOWING TECHNOLOGICAL MEDIA ART IN 1989, AND DEALS WITH WORKS AND WRITING THAT EXPLORE THE SOCIAL RELATIONS BETWEEN US AND MEDIA. VENUES IN WHICH LICHTY HAS BEEN INVOLVED WITH SOLO AND COLLABORATIVE WORKS INCLUDE THE WHITNEY & TURIN BIENNIALS, MARIBOR TRIENNIAL, PERFORMA PERFORMANCE BIENNIAL, ARS ELECTRONICA, AND THE INTERNATIONAL SYMPOSIUM ON THE ELECTRONIC ARTS (ISEA). HE ALSO WORKS EXTENSIVELY WITH VIRTUAL WORLDS, INCLUDING SECOND LIFE, AND HIS WORK, BOTH SOLO AND WITH HIS PERFORMANCE ART GROUP, SECOND FRONT, HAS BEEN FEATURED IN FLASH ART, EIKON MILAN, AND ARTNEWS [HTTP://WWW.VOYD.COM/](http://www.void.com/)



Cyhead

# THE POST HUMAN CYBORGIAN BODY: DITHERING BETWEEN THE REAL AND THE VIRTUAL

by Claire Burke

"I am not that set of limbs  
called the human body"  
René Descartes

I/Glitch 2016 is Ireland's leading Digital Arts Festival that presents artists who work with media and technology. 'Dither' is a two-part installation based between two galleries, Rua Red, Tallaght, and Rathmines based Mart Art Gallery. It is not uncommon for audio visual artists to work collaboratively, Dither is a pairing of artist

Janna Kemperman and Kevin Freaney of Algorithm and CLU. Consisting of a mix of 3d software and projection mapping, this installation includes a varied skillset. A blend of technological and artistic skills, 'Dither' poses the question of the parallels between our current technological state and human communication. Dithering





involves creating a pattern of screen pixels to simulate colours that cannot otherwise be displayed. (Spalter, 1999)

In Mart Art Gallery, *Dither I* is displayed as an audio visual Installation. It uses projection mapping to engage the audience with a sense of a virtual environment. It starts with a familiar sense of online interaction. Evoking a sense of the nostalgia through it's terminal font choice and typing within an online chat room environment, we are exposed to communication through text. The soundtrack is cleverly composed; in the beginning there are no voices just text, this resonates with the loss of the physical human voice. Communication of the user is through the machine, visualised by text. The familiar sound of typing leads to a conversation, with the viewer witnessing each green letter appearing, evoking a sense of real time.

The user A.McC\_00 types; "How do I know you are real?" SJ\_123 responds: "We are talking right now in the same place at the same time. We are together here. Does that not feel connected?" We see the relationship develop with A.McC\_00 suggesting "I want to take this one step further. It's funny I wouldn't say this if you were here" An array of pixels crisscross continuously on the screen to form hands and eventually a body and we are immersed into a virtual landscape of geometric planes. a connected network, a series of RGB coloured lines form a grid structure to reveal a human form.

An audio track then kicks in, a visual rhythm echoing our being in the world. We hear undertones of recognisable sounds of modems, beeps dial ups and connectivity. We see a virtual

being coming to existence inside a machine and moving through a network of a series of connected lines and dots. The lyrics spoken with a Daft Punk like robotic voice states "My analogue form and my digital self as one...in conflict"

We have witnessed a relationship develop online, one that has no physical interaction. We sense a connection and a merging of virtual and human. The installation comes to an end when we see more recognisable human figures. A hand eventually appears to reach out, signalling a crossover or perhaps a move between the real and the virtual, the physical and non physical.

Cultural significance is articulated through presenting us with the concept of digital medium specificity, through a perception of temporality and a 3d sensory environment. The viewer is reminded of our constant interaction with networks and digital connectivity. We live under the conditions of interfaces, various screens, displays and peripheral devices. We exist within an integrated structure of networks and data.

Technology is so deeply woven into contemporary life, there is a knowing sense of the self existing online. Our current state of mind lives within a networked society and an electronic environment. The installation examines the ways in which a body can be implicated within art and technology and the discourse around how we interact in the digital world. Issues such as identity and human physical connection are explored by the artists. Freeney states that the two pieces explore identity in the modern internet age. (Wall, 2016). He suggests that "the majority of people in Ireland communicate with each other behind

an avatar or a coded picture – like a .jpeg, .png, or .gif – on social media, email, message services or video, etc." (Wall, 2016) Freeney's concerns are part of the contemporary condition; human bodies living within the boundaries of technology. It challenges what it means to be human, or more aptly; post human.

The notion of a technological body is ever present in mainstream society. There is an overlapping of the human senses with digital devices. Clarke in a bid to define what it is to be human, suggests that the post human body is a body authored by it's technologies (Zylinska, 2002). Through our increased engagement with technological devices there is now a societal shift with the technological self. Advances have blurred the lines between humans and machines. Mc Luhan suggested that technology was an extension of man and had a profound effect on human beings. He suggested that electronic media would have the ability to reconstruct to such an extent that it would alter the nature of man. (Hayles, 1999) Such advances have been made since, from media's evolution to the online, virtual and the cyborg. The age of the human is drawing to a close and we are entering into the realm of the post human.

Through our bodies we interact with the world and the digital revolution has caused a breakdown of physical and non-physical. Haraway described the idea of the human body intertwined with technology. In 1997 she argued that within our society due to engagement with technology, we have all become cyborgs.

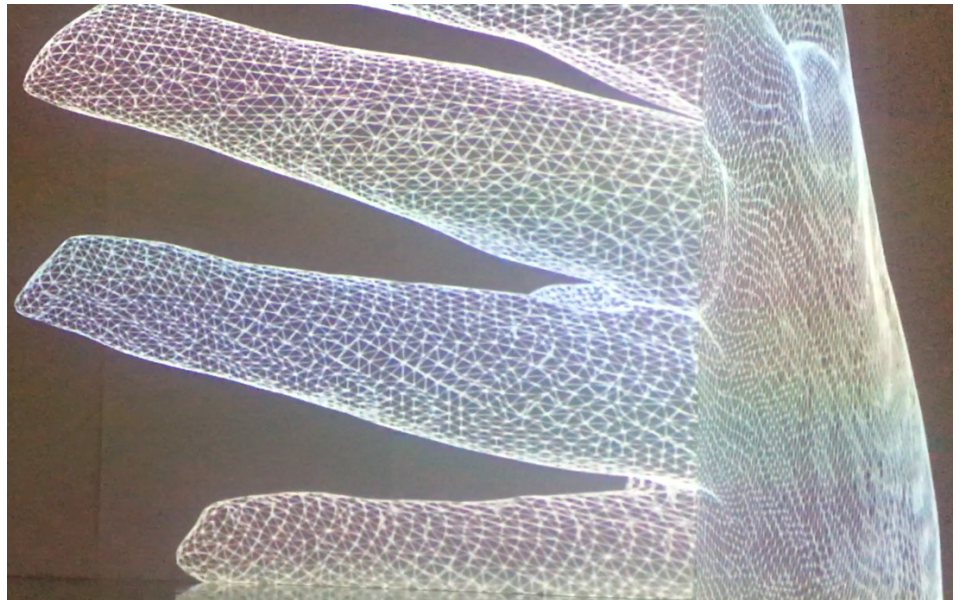
A cyborg is a "cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism" (Haraway, 1991, p,149). Kunzru sug-



gests that for Haraway “the realities of modern life happen to include a relationship between people and technology so intimate that it’s no longer possible to tell where we end and machines begin” (Kunzru, 1997). The evolution of humans and the development of technology are intrinsically intertwined. Hayles reminds us that is “important to recognise that the construction of the post human does not require the subject to be a literal cyborg”. (Hayles, 1999, 4) So undeniably the era of the cyborg is here.

An audio visual installation that is very relevant to contemporary conditions, Dither I is a reflection on the current state of society. It is a creative expression of computer mediated communication. The artists have explored technology not just as a tool for creating art work like many new media artists, but as a gateway to use the technology. Communication is the transfer of information, human experience is reduced to 1’s and 0’s. They have used the medium in it’s own right to intervene artistically and open up the question of what it means to be human. It acknowledges the relevance and advantages of technology and its effects on the communication and extension of our senses and interactive abilities.

Artists have always experimented with technology and Dither reflects on the complicated relationship between art, technology and culture. It questions the issue of what importance do physical human bodies have in the digital age today? Human bodies have already been altered through various technologies such as medical devices



Handweb

## THE CHALLENGE IS TO THINK ABOUT THE CURRENT CONDITIONS OF THE BODY

and prostheses. Stelarc claims that “The body has become profoundly obsolete in the intense information environment it has created”(Atzori and Woolford, n.d.) As technology becomes advanced, it has extended

our natural human capabilities. It allows for the enhancement of the natural human senses within an interactive environment. “Sensory and digital technologies are creating a whole new environment

that has the potential to override normal sensory experience and replace it digitally.” (O’Mahony, 2002, p.52)

Questioning the existence that humans now have in the world, Poster states that in relation the body, internet communications have restructured it, configuring it to an online wired body. (Zylinska, 2002) Dither encompasses that issue of conflict with technology and questions the effect that it has on our identity, bodies and the digital depictions of ourselves. It exposes the fact that we hide behind avatars and that physical human com-

munication is lacking. We have gone beyond physical communication and it is becoming less necessary to function in daily life. Perhaps at this point in time communication through the human body is not necessary. Sterlac’s claim, is that the body is obsolete.

“It is time to question whether a bipedal, breathing body with binocular vision and a 1400cc brain is an adequate biological form. It cannot cope with the quantity, complexity and quality of information it has accumulated; it is intimidated by the precision, speed and power of technology and is biologically ill-equipped to cope with its new extra terrestrial environment”. (Zylinska, 2002, p.101)

The challenge is to think about the current conditions of the body. Technology has lead to a loss of a physical connection but has brought an extension. Fleischmann and Strauss suggest that “Man is losing this head to Technology”. (Violante, 2015, 6) Whether it is the form of an avatar or on social media the virtual being and the evolution of the cyborg has become more valuable than our own human physical form. But this does not mean

that there needs to be a physical separation of the human body from the world. Post humanism is understood as a claim that humans are no longer sufficient.

“The individual is already an obsolete organism, useful...but left in the background, infrastructure of a humanity in which “evolution” is no longer interested”. (Stiegler, 2009, p.95)

In the shift of human to post human, will the human be no longer sufficient? Technology’s role has given humans computer mediated communication, the creation of online connectivity. In relation to advances with the virtual, Hayles argues that everything is becoming virtual including physical contact, so why shouldn’t our bodies become virtual to? (Moser and MacLeod, 1996)

There is a shift from the need to use our bodies to communicate or experience interaction. Our machines are an extension of ourselves, we are rapidly relying on them and to a point where they have become apart of us. Dither addresses networked telecommunication and implications it may have on human machine relationships. We have become conditioned to online and virtual experiences where are bodies are present but our minds are not. Hayles suggested in 1996 that our bodies are still material and necessary for survival on the planet, our one and only home. (Moser and MacLeod, 1996)

Are we already cyborgs? Ever more relevant is Haraway’s question “Why should our bodies end at the skin?” (Haraway, 1991, 178) We need to re-think the relationship between man and technology. It may be the case

that obsolescence of the current human body may be a fundamental condition to exist in a rapidly evolving post human technological civilisation. Perhaps the artist does not need to be present.

## CLAIRE BURKE

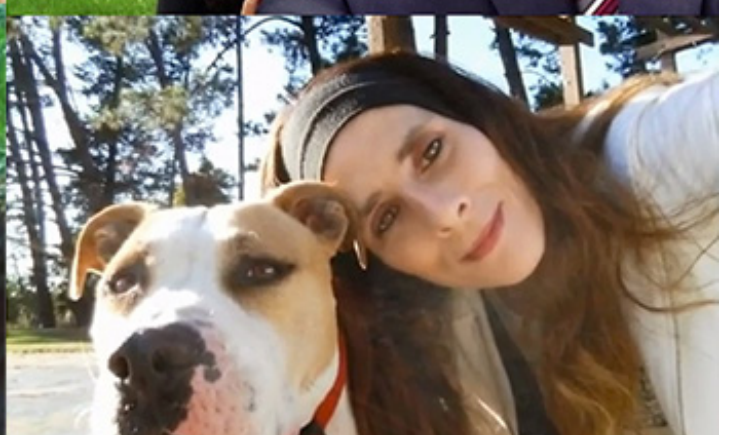
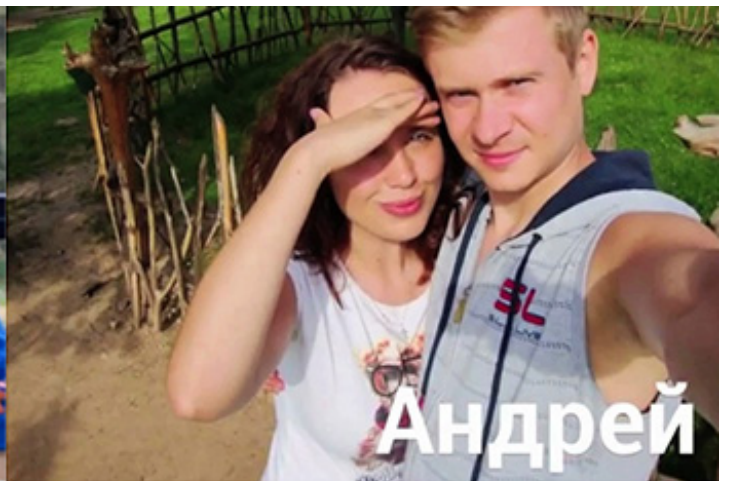
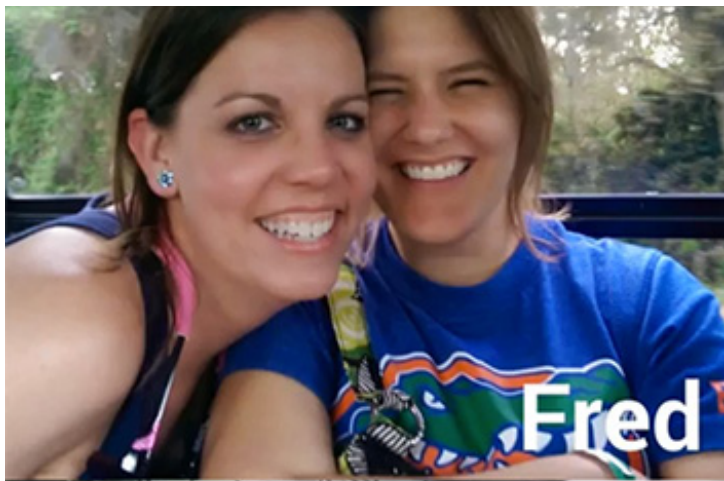
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Year in Photos 2014 - Composition Examples (Auto crop and recentring)

# ALGORITHMIC MEMORIES

## The case of “Year in Photos 2014”

by Marco Cadioli

At the end of 2014, Google sent a gift to its users: a video titled “Year in Photos”, which told the story of their past year in images. The video began with the pictures that each user archived on Google+ Photos and it was generated by an Artificial Intelligence that selected the best images,

defined a narrative sequence and provided an edit synced with the music. It was an intervention that later frequently repeated itself within the social media. Even Facebook creates short customised videos for the end of the year, for friendships celebration or for anniversaries, but it limits







Year in Photos 2014 - Is it a statue or the wife for the Artificial Intelligence?

itself to the material that users post on it, so no one now notices it anymore.

However, within the case of “Years in Photo 2014” there are some elements that stimulate us to a deeper reflection about how the algorithm interferes in the representation of oneself, in particular in their intervention on photographic material and on the narrative.

As starting material, Google had the entire photographic archive of every user: family pictures, children, private events and personal moments, exactly as they have been uploaded to the cloud without any preselection by the users. Moreover, there is a fact that is even more important and inspired this project: some users started to share the videos on Youtube, making them come out from a private view and use and offering us the possibility of a collective analysis.

The project (1) *Algorithmic Memories* offers some instruments to lead this analysis, proposing a new comparative view (2) of videos belonging to different individuals in order to identify similarities and recurrent themes in the process of standardization of the narration of oneself. Furthermore, the model analyses a series of screenshots that isolates the moments when the logic of the system is more

evident, trying to highlight some mechanisms that usually remain invisible to the user.

### Auto Awesome

Everything started at the Google I/O keynote in San Francisco in 2013, when Vic Gundrot, at that time VP of Google, presented a series of new photographic features of Google+. *Auto Awesome* (3) was among the presented tools that operated pictures in an automatic way and contained functions that were being proposed as a support for the user that found itself to manage a big quantity of images, created by the almost daily use of cameras on mobile devices. With these, the shutter click was then completely automated, the archiving operation was simplified by the cloud services and it did not require particular skills. However, the majority of the users was not able to operate on the materials afterward, or did not have time to select and catalog them nor to use basic photo editing softwares.

Google, perfectly in line with these needs, offered *Computer Vision Algorithms* (4), which was able to select the best and clearest pictures with the correct exposition, the ones with friends' faces and identified landmarks. It also introduced systems of image recognition that cataloged the pictures basing on their content, recognized common subjects like





beach, mountain, horses, sunsets, birthdays, in a constantly expanding set.

It was a matter of a series of operations that went far beyond the simple archiving and that at that time started to be delegated to an Artificial Intelligence.

## Composition

One of the first elements that it is worth paying attention to is the intervention of "auto crop and retargeting" applied to the selected images of "Year in Photos". It is a matter of cropping and re-centering the pictures in the direction of obtaining a better framing that is adapted to the layout and the format of the screen.

In order to highlight this passage, we focused on the images chosen as the cover, paginated with the name of the user and the year, which could be found at the beginning of each video and, therefore, we suppose have been considered to be particularly significant by the system.

Hence, we gathered a composition logic that referred to the guideline largely adopted within the photography world and that has now shifted to the systems of "auto-composition". It is a matter of well-known rules that could be found in any photography manual: "the rule of thirds", "diagonal dominance", "visual balance", "size region", all considered to be effective for the balance of the image and for the stimulation of an emotional response.

It bears upon automating an aesthetic factor as the cut and the frame of an image, preferring a subject to another, de-



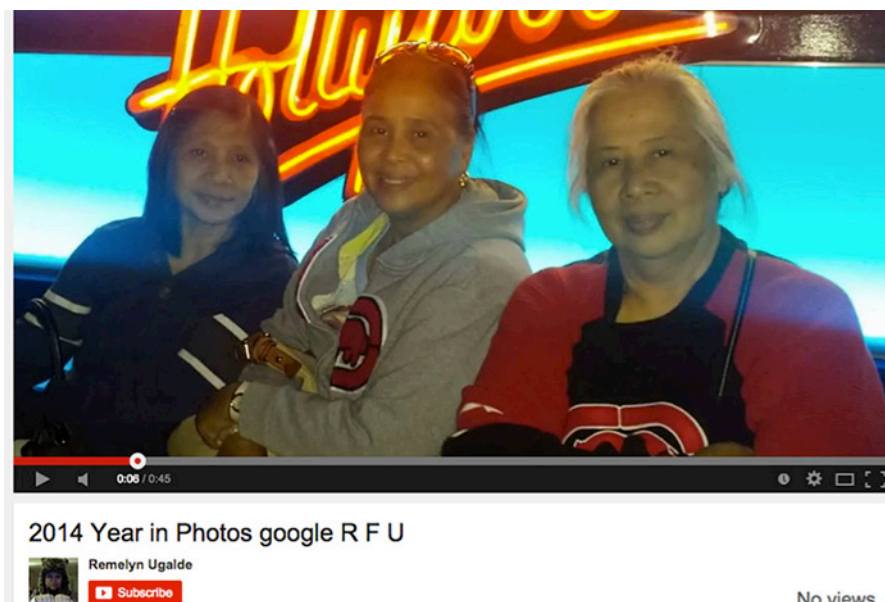
ciding what is important and what could be cut, therefore introducing a parameter of computational aesthetics able to numerically define which would be the best results for the human eye and for inspiring the correct emotive response in the viewer.

From the analyzed covers, we detected how the application, on a large scale of a process of “auto-crop and re-targeting”, would have taken towards an evident standardization of the image, which interfered in the representation of oneself and tended to impose a mood aligned to all the stories. It is to be underlined how this process was not just applied to the covers, but also to the majority of the images in the videos. The pictures were systematically cut and re-centered to be adapted to the template of the slide show that alternated a series of fixed layouts where the images were put.

Moreover, it is important to remember that the cover image was automatically selected by the AI without any indication of the user. The parameters utilized for the selection of the “Picture of the Year” for each user was not declared, yet it was always presumably portraits of the user itself, often with its friends, all smiling. Obviously, there were exceptions and we do not know if the recipient liked the choice, as in the case of a family portrayed while being around a shopping cart in a supermarket aisle.

## Smile

Among the series of tools that was included in *Autoawesome*, “Smile” deserves a certain attention. It added smiles where they were not, literally moving them from a picture to another. The manner of shooting different portraits of the same subject



“Year in Photos 2014” reposted on YouTube [No views]

is very common, precisely to capture different expressions, yet it may happen that the subject has a better smile in the first picture but a better pose in the second, where it does not smile. In this case, “Smile” would extract the smile from the first picture and paste it onto the second, proposing the result as a better picture.

In particular, among group photos, people usually try to picture the perfect situation, when everybody is smiling at the same time. That situation is considered so important that, since the 40’s, the classic “say cheese” has been introduced: it naturally takes the subjects to smile in sync. Even in the case of group photos “Smile” analyzed the pictures of a sequence, extracted the best smiles and re-matched them in a new photo, where every subject was smiling at the same time.

I performed some tests to strengthen the system and analyze the results, having the possibility of arranging both original photos and modified ones in order to isolate the areas of intervention.

In each group, the subjects were invited to smile alternately, to the extent

of being sure that in the shot sequence there were no images where the subjects were all smiling at the same time. “Smile” systematically re-matched the pictures of the sequence to create the one where everybody was smiling, even in groups with twelve subjects. This process generated the picture of a situation that has never really happened - it violated the noema of photography itself, according to Roland Barthes: “Has Been”- it inserted an image of a possible, desirable event among the others, that was supposed to be better and that we would have liked to happen but that, in reality, never really did. The picture, so remixed, was considered to be better: it was then accepted by the user, it passed the selection of the Artificial Intelligence, became the cover of the video of the memories of the year, it was spread, according to the mechanisms of the circulation of images within the web, came out from the social media and it entered in the personal and collective history.

If we did not see the original, we could not tell how many of these smiles are real and how many have been substituted; soon not even who shot the

picture would remember exactly what happened that day. Even this operation has evident involvement when it is massively applied to thousand of users because it models the collective memories that will tell of a “Smile” era.

## The video

Years in Photos 2014 was essentially a slideshow that alternated full-screen images to compositions of two or three pictures, using the same layout, with the occasional addition of short video sequences. There were four principal formats which differed one another by their duration: 50”, 45”, 43” and 37” and the images were synced with a small number of repeated soundtracks.

The materials to be edited were chosen among the events of the year that were thought to be significant for each user, based on the information associated with the photos. The system considered the date and the place of the picture and it was able to determine whether the photo was shot indoor or during a journey; it looked for the faces of the friends that appeared more frequently and it could understand if the picture was a selfie. The photos were already automatically organized with thematic tags like sea, mountain, outdoor, indoor, birthday, sport and these categories were used to build the story. The “holidays” event, for example, was inserted into a precise moment of the narrative, even in videos of different users, creating a further level of homogenisation. The same happened for the “night out with friends” moment or for a fast sequence of portraits, or for children faces that were also included in a clear moment of the video. The result was a strong predominance of the format on the content and the video was typified

by the rigid repetition of transitions between an image and another, by the identical rhythm, by the perfect synchronism of the video with the music and by the harmonious pace of the colors.

The story of each one’s life was equally distributed among journeys, friends, outdoor activities, parties, selfies, sea waves, sunsets, always with a smile.

## A gift

When each user watched its own video did not have any information about the others, which were identically generated. The user found it original, made it its own and completed it by adding his memories. The production process remained invisible and subliminal.

For an audience without any knowledge about how to use basic content creation tools, a video that was edited, titled, synced with music and already online, ready to be shared on the social media, became an appreciated gift and it was not seen as invasive. The marketing strategy of Google presented it precisely as a gift and the fact that we did not know if and when it would have been sent to us accentuated the surprise effect, almost like a relished care that was reserved for us.

The messages which followed the photos that the users shared on the social networks underlined this positive attitude: “Thanks to Google for the Auto Awesome treatment!”,

“Sometimes Autoawesome is actually kind of awesome.”, “It did it again. - Aw, Google surprised me with an auto-awesome movie! I love it!”

Indeed, is true that many other applications offered analogous functions to those analyzed, there were Apps for auto cropping, Apps to paste the face on other subjects, sophisticated software of auto editing, however, they were always effects that needed to be voluntarily selected and applied, with an informed action and some control parameters. In the case of Google+, the intervention automatically and often unconsciously happened within the act of backing up oneself’s photos into the cloud archives because the system was set by default (5) and symbolically the intervention happened right when the data was memorized. There was something like an overlapping among the memory registration inside our mind, that caused a series of

choices, a selection of significant moments, opinions and the work of the software that selected the images, optimized them and edited them.

It was a parallel work that tended to make memories appear and the pictures, more similar to glazed moments than to the lived reality itself, in a story that was emphasized,

idealized, rewritten in arbitrary sequences of sense, determined by an Artificial Intelligence. It did not matter if within this passage there were inserted moments that never really happened, as the analysis of “Smile” underlined. The tone had to be “Awesome” and even the banalest images,

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IF THE PICTURE WAS  
A SELFIE**



the random clips, the scenes that were everything but epic, would have been treated as they were “Awesome”.

The analysis of the case of “Years in Photos 2014” allowed us to realize the stratification of the interventions that the algorithms were operating on the contents. This happened in 2014, in a still experimenting phase of the application of Artificial Intelligence to the organization and elaboration of personal photographic materials and it was the first step on a path that is rapidly evolving, naturally infiltrating inside our processes of representation and storytelling. We had our 50 seconds of celebrity, it does not matter if then they will be left with zero views.

■ MARCO CADIOLI



We would like to hope that it was a mistake of the Artificial Intelligence in looking for the best moment of the year

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1-The first version of Algorithmic Memories was exhibited in May 2015 at Link Cabinet, an exhibition project by Matteo Cremonesi for the Link Art Center (<http://linkcabinet.eu/>). It was a webpage with two paired videos directly selected among the uploaded videos on Youtube.

2-We suggest the viewing of the following video associated with the reading of this text: Algorithmic Memories - <https://vimeo.com/213641449>

3-Creations was made by Auto Awesome while maintaining many of the previous functions and adding new ones and it is part of the contemporary archiving system Google Photos.

4-Computer vision is an interdisciplinary field that deals with how computers can be made for learning from digital images. Computer vision tasks include methods for acquiring, processing, analyzing and understanding digital images.

5-“Auto Awesome is on by default” Google declares. The elaboration of the images automatically happened on pictures that were chosen by Google itself. The user received the edited picture and could save it or delete it.

## MARCO CADIOLI

MARCO CADIOLI HAS FOCUSED HIS RESEARCH ON IMAGES THAT MATERIALIZE ON COMPUTER SCREENS, BLURRING THE BOUNDARIES BETWEEN REAL AND VIRTUAL. THE NET IS THE TERRITORY OF MARCO CADIOLI'S EXPLORATIONS, WITH THE ANALYTICAL EYE OF THE PHOTOGRAPHIC MEDIUM SINCE THE EARLY 2000S. HE HAS EXHIBITED AT NETSPACE, MAXXI, ROME 2007; ATOPIC FESTIVAL, PARIS 2009; FOTOGRAFIA, MACRO TESTACCIO, ROME 2010; NEOLUDICA, BIENNALE DI VENEZIA 2011; AFK, CASINO LUXEMBOURG 2011; BYOB, MUSEO PECCI MILAN 2012; INTERACCESS ELECTRONIC MEDIA ARTS CENTRE, TORONTO 2013. HE IS A LECTURER AT THE ACCADEMIA BELLE ARTI DI BRERA, MILANO AND ACCADEMIA SANTIAGIULIA DI BRESCIA.

[HTTP://WWW.MARCOADIOLI.COM/](http://www.marcocadioli.com/)





## The past has become remarkably adjustable

The digital network allows users to actively and simultaneously produce and reproduce their and other versions of a collective past. Collective memories are open to entire communities and their form has become as fluid and in flux as their traditional concept inherently is. A generative multi-memory is created, in which the browser is used as a collective memory-tool, providing the possibility to react and upload real-time. We can write our past for the future to come from our homes, in our chairs, at our desks. By circulating images and image sequences online, the image repeats itself and comes back again.

The collective memory is embedded in the spreading and repetition of these creations. They become a collective memory tool and simultaneously, a collective representation. Users insert a bit of themselves into the production and send it across the web for others to use and commemorate. Here, memory is literally figuratively on the move; images and videos are posted on various websites to show the user's concern with the collective memory. As the concept of collective memory is in flux, networks are constantly in flux, they do not fall silent. Geert Lovink already stresses this point in *Networks Without A Cause* (2011); the web has no memory, it does not store – how are we able to understand all of this information when its context is always in transition? Memory and commemoration, official and individual memory now co-exist in the ever changing network.

Can we make sense of the merging of these ever changing concepts in order to design our past and present into the future?

## Mediating Memory

Ironically, one of the most fundamental aspects to the abstract and complex concept of collective memory is that its context is always developing and open to meaning. Where memory relates to our identity, collective memory relates to our national or community identity. “We are in need of a narrative that binds us in a uniting feeling, a togetherness – the feeling that we are not alone in this.”, Carolyn Kitch writes in *Mourning in America*: ritual, redemption, and recovery in news narrative after September 11 (2005). This nation identity can survive and evolve overtime, Kitch explains, meaning content-wise, it can and will change, if only because of the ever changing collective. However abstract it may seem, collective memory does take on corporeal form in means of memorials, museums and lives on in the minds of the people who feel aligned with this specific memory. The collective memory depends heavily on mediation. Its presence and influence can only be discerned through their ongoing usage, Motti Neiger (a.o.) write in *On Media Memory: Collective Memory in a New Media Age* (2011), it needs production and performance, since we cannot actually possess this certain moment in history we try to remember. We need to mediate to remember. This is where Pierre Nora's concept of *Les Lieux de Mémoire* comes to mind; the places of memory, such as physical monuments, which are built with its main purpose to prevent the loss of our shared memory and in this way, stand apart from history. As Neiger

(a.o.) point out, collective memory is mediated through rituals, ceremonial commemorations and mass media texts. Examples are a nation's half mast flag as a sign for mourning which is performed on specific dates to commemorate specific events or performed right after specific events to show grief and respect, the ‘Dod-enherdenking’ (Remembrance Day) on the 4th of May in the Netherlands, where two minutes of silence at eight o'clock in the evening is contributed to commemorate those who died for ‘our’ freedom in the WW II and the special supplement of the Dutch newspaper *Algemeen Dagblad* in July 2014

to commemorate the victims of the MH17 airplane crash. Another significant example of such mass media texts is the awarded section of

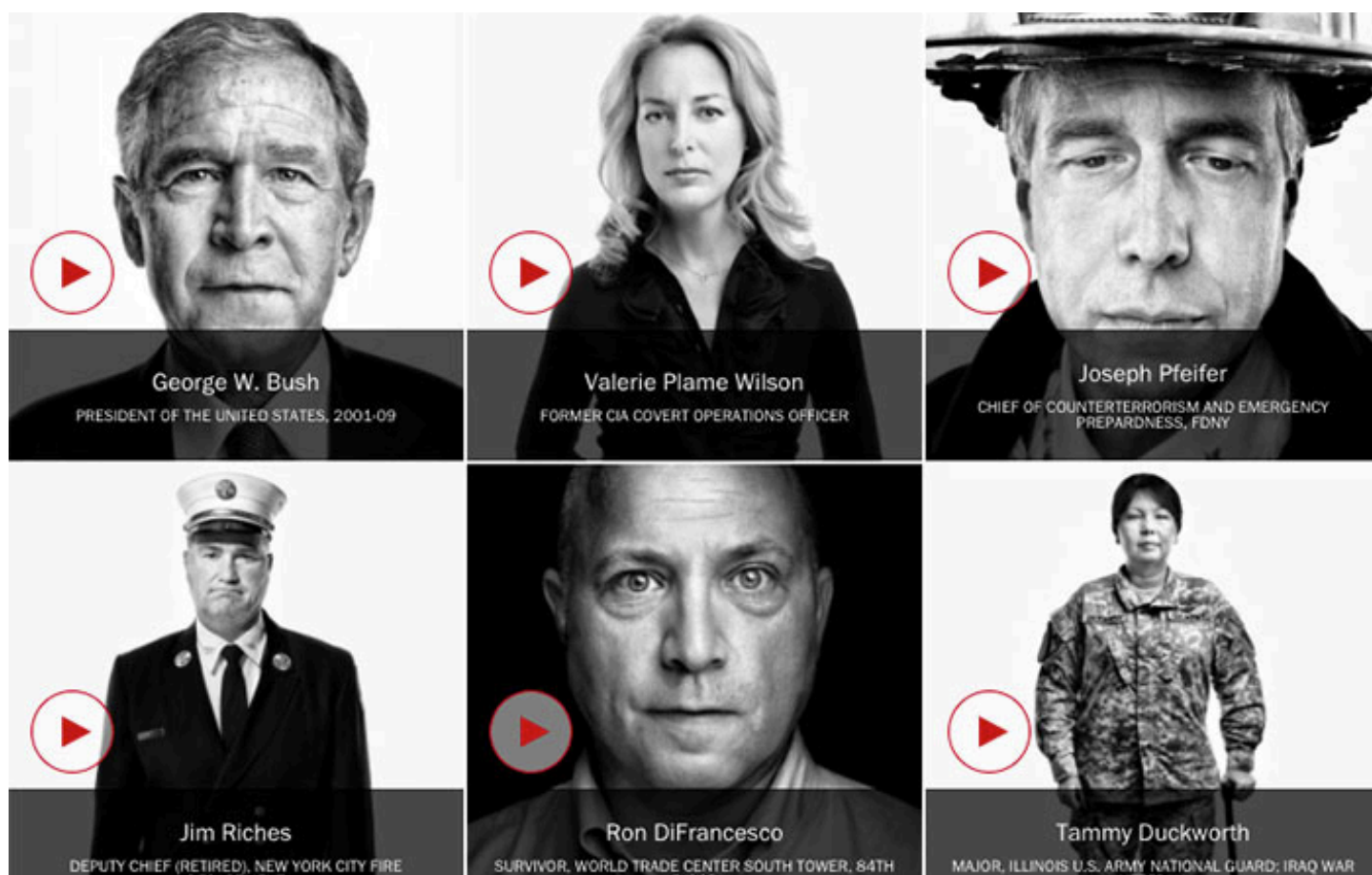
**THE COLLECTIVE  
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The New York Times during the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, called *A Nation Challenged* which

ran till December 31 2001, but will remain indefinite on [www.nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com) and played an important part in the nation's mourning process by portraying victims in a very personal and honouring way. [img 01] This section is a very good example of what we call public memory – an intersection of official memory by institutions and vernacular memory, which represents almost literally the voice of the people – you could say, the individual experience of a collective memory. The web has shown to be open to combinations of official and vernacular memory such as for example the German online magazine *SPIEGEL* where online users can submit articles on German history and *TIME Magazine's* Por-







Screenshot website TIME Magazine's 'Portraits of Resilience' 2011 (Retrieved May 7th, 2017)

traits of Resilience from 2011 where survivors, family members, US officials and the President share their personal stories of 9/11 on video. [img 02] However, more and more users circulate and share their own creations of a certain collective memory.

### Temporality

On the web and digital interfaces, a memory is generated which moves back and forth between past, present and future. It shapes a complex memory, where in the shaping we lose memory by deleting, uploading, producing and reproducing over and over again and at the same time, gain a collective memory in the form of these processes and the relations they render. Quoting Media Theorist & philosopher Wolfgang Ernst on his concept of processual memory: "The web provides immediate feedback, turning all present data into archival entries and archival entries into data

– a dynamic agency, with no delay between memory and the present. Archive and memory become metaphorical; a function of transfer processes.", which Ernst describes as an economy of circulation – permanent transformations and updating. There are no places of memory, Ernst states, there are simply urls. In other words; digital memory is built from its architecture, it is embedded in the network and constituted from how it links from one to another. The dynamics of the network, history and the collective have fallen into each other, something we can start to rethink through Manuel Castells' concept of the space of flows where humans, computers and the network are connected, manifesting eventually into something physical but how, where and when is determined by the network itself. Both Ernst and Castells connect the notion of the network to time: the way a certain medium produces time, is the way experience and memory are

generated. "History is first organised according to the availability of visual material", Castells writes, "then submitted to the computerized possibility of selecting seconds of frames to be pieced together, or split apart, according to specific discourses.". Historical static time, the narrative, the chronological ordering we all seem to depend on, meets digital media temporality. In Castells' theory this is also influenced by the maker and its interpreter: "The user-producer and user-consumer organise information, perception and expression by their impulses, distorting the historical ordering of chronological events and become arranged in time sequences based on these impulses.". Castells describes this as a culture of the eternal and the ephemeral; it reaches back and forth the sequence of our cultural history of events but at the same time it is transitory because each arrangement and sequence depend on the context and purpose it is constructed. We are





Google Search by Image: 9/11 commemoration images, screenshot (Retrieved April 3rd, 2017)

not in a culture of circularity, Castells concludes, but we find ourselves in the midst of undifferentiated temporality of cultural expressions. What Castells tries to point out here, is that even in a time-based medium such as the digital network, present discourse in the Foucauldian sense is still just as highly influential. Network collective memory does not only concern time, it is time projected on time, over and over again.

## Networked Collective Memory

Ernst describes the idea of a digital museum and archive cautiously as 'non-places'. From Nora's places of memory we are now moving towards digital non-places of memory. In the context of networks, these non-places of memory can be seen as processes of memory; a generative memory with its meaning, collective and mediation always on the move. For example, the images and GIFs of 9/11 have had the opportunity to grow over the past fourteen years. When we compare it's size and content to a much more 'fresh' and 'smaller', yet still very political trauma like the crash of MH17, we can see that a development of size and content has taken place overtime. Not only has the web become a primary medium to our contemporary existence over the past decade, the content has also evolved in a much more symbolised content, instead of only news reporting and photo's of the wreckage or places where the disaster took place. There is the collage-image, which appears in large amounts on the web, but in content do not differ very much but still have very subtle user-additions. These collages often follow banner, GIF and movie-like aesthetics; shorts texts and strong symbols. In many examples, the burning towers, the American flag and the American Eagle are combined into one picture. Variations contain photo's of rescue

workers, the Statue of Liberty and two towers wreckage. Blurring and opacity techniques have been used to blend the different symbols coherently into one picture and gives a dreamy, timeless and movie-like touch. There is a repeated use of images in these collages, which stirs a feeling of recognition. The more it is repeated, the more repetition it shows in itself. This falls back on network dynamics; "Spreading leads to more spreading," Anna Munster writes in *An Aesthetics of Networks* (2013), "The more things go viral, the more they become networked. It folds back on itself in order to replicate, it builds on itself towards one point but simultaneously generates something new; platforms, sensations and unpredictable relations." – and a new form of collective memory, as I might add.

The image is shared and picked up by the collective: the one image is influenced by or created from the other image. And while it is picked up, a little bit of the user is rendered into these images and send along the web. The image, in this sense, is always in transition and refers back to the collective of its creation. Statements are added to keep the memory close, to invoke it. We Will Never Forget, We Will Always Remember, we try to ensure ourselves that we still possess this memory we try to keep near us, even more so in the overwhelming quantity of the web. What is created here, is a collective monument spread along urls, always open to individual additions, interaction and loss and where the actual mediation, the actual collective memory, lies in the repetition and sharing of this mediation. We are looking at a digital *Lieu de Mémoire* – obviously, we are in need of a new definition.

## Designing Time

We have only just tackled the idea of the places of memory and now we have to move our attention to memory developing and fading at a much higher speed in a network that renders relations and experiences in a way we are only beginning to understand. In both concepts, time is everything. Collective memory sets out to connect people from the present to people and events from the past in order to build future memory. Digital time, in comparison to static time as presented by historical writing, is an inherent temporal concept. There is the possibility to publish immediately and what is uploaded can be altered minutes later, sometimes lost forever. With the possibility of the public to be co-writers, designers and editors of collective memory, another memory is generated, which is constituted solely out of the sum of uploads, repetition, edits and deletions of its users; a transformative memory with its context always being processed. As designers and researchers, it becomes apparent that it is just about time we design our relation towards time. Are we makers, interpreters, conservators, archivists, observers, constructors, are we all or maybe we seek to forget? As designers and researchers, we have to distinguish ourselves from the memory creating crowd in order to envision and shape future 'better times'.

■ PATTY JANSEN

## Acknowledgements:

"Networked Collective Memory" has been published before on invitation by visual culture and critical graphic design platform Open Set in their graphic design summer school reader 2016 called Memories of the Future and on invitation by graphic designer and researcher Stefan Schäfer for his artistic publication I Am Become Digital Death, The Destroyer of Worlds which was launched during Dutch Design Week 2016 as well as published online on Schäfer's platform Digital Necropolis, focussing on the idea of digital afterlives and exploring ways of memorialising these afterlives.

<http://www.openset.nl/reader/>  
<http://stefanschafer.net/>

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## PATTY JANSEN

PATTY JANSEN (NL) HOLDS A MASTER'S DEGREE IN ARTISTIC RESEARCH FROM THE UNIVERSITY OF AMSTERDAM. IN HER RESEARCH AND ART PRACTICE, HER OBSESSION FOR REMEMBERING/COMMEMORATION (DERIVED FROM PIERRE NORA'S LES LIEUX DE MÉMOIRE) AND TYPOGRAPHY LEADS HER INTO TRYING TO GRASP THE EVER CHANGING CONCEPT OF COLLECTIVE MEMORY BY ANALYSING, DECONSTRUCTING AND QUESTIONING ITS MANY REPRESENTATIONS THROUGH MEDIA SUCH AS PRINTED MATTER, THE DIGITAL NETWORK AND INSTITUTIONS. IN DOING SO, JANSEN IS HIGHLY CONCERNED WITH THE PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE AS CONCEPTS OF TIME AND HOW THESE TERMS ARE NEGOTIATED, PERFORMED AND EXPERIENCED AS WHAT WE CALL OUR HISTORY TODAY.







Charlotte Warne Thomas in residence at the Window Space, London. LIMITACTION (2015), Photograph by Margarida Brôco Amorim

# MOVING OUTSIDE FIXED BOUNDARIES: ... 'IN RESIDENCE'?

by Miriam La Rosa

'[...] absolute hospitality requires that I open up my home and that I give not only to the foreigner [...], but to the absolute, unknown, anonymous other, and that I give place to them, that I let them come, that I let them arrive, and take place in the place I offer them, without asking of them either reciprocity (entering into a pact) or even their names. [...] Nowadays, a reflection on hospitality presupposes, among other things, the possibility of a rigorous delimitation of thresholds or frontiers: between the familial and the non-familial, between the foreign and the non-foreign, the citizen and the non-citizen, but first of all between the private and the public.' (1) - Jacques Derrida, 2000



## Introduction

This year's Whitney Biennial will be remembered for the firestorm it generated around notions of censorship, diversity and, above all, identity politics. The epicentre was Dana Schutz's *Open Casket* (2016), an abstract depiction of the lynched face of (black) American boy Emmett Till, who was murdered in the 1950s for allegedly flirting with a (white) store clerk. For several weeks, in the news and on social media, the artworld was divided between those demanding the removal and destruction of the work, led by the words of artist Hannah Black – for whom 'shame is not correctly represented as a painting of a dead Black boy by a white artist' (2) – and those who defended art's freedom of expression, its aesthetic and political values, beyond any form of ethnicity or race.

Amongst the variety of arguments that were brought forward – which, in this instance, we will not attempt to particularly support nor challenge – one is relevant to frame our discussion: the notion of identity is now displaced by that of identification, as a colleague pointed out to me, revisiting Foucault. Today we tend to identify ourselves with cross-cultural references, which derive from settings as diverse as our immediate surroundings, the individuals we encounter, the journeys we take and the information we are subjected to. Foucault described identity as a temporary construction, i.e. people do not have a 'real' identity (3) within them but perform one (Foucault, 1979). Identification is instead an ongoing process, which entails the shaping of the self by means of distinctive experiences. Globalisation has certainly amplified the significance of the latter, with its emphasis on merging, intermingling

and mixing cultures, in a condition of constant shifting and movement. In this scenario, the definition of 'individual' and 'community' are continually re-negotiated. Fluidity and increased movement, in fact, stimulate self-identification with different cultural groups and the establishment of communities of interest in a fast, free, and flexible way. The Internet is a further facilitator of this process, offering the opportunity to travel easily from the comfort zone of one's own house. Such a degree of ubiquity brings the act of identification to a higher level, where complex identities unfold in the dual dimension of 'online/offline'.

When applying these thoughts to the relationship between art and society, the residency can be seen as an ideal format to promote a contemporary notion of (artistic) identity – one deriving from the contact with specific locales and interest groups. Residency programmes, in fact, provide art practitioners with the possibility to move, stop and produce, as a result of research in a distinctive environment. Whilst this phenomenon is not of recent elaboration (4), the present century has furthered its expansion. Alongside the traditional understanding of residency, a few attempts have been made to propose a digital version of it, hosting the experience of art online, across multiple platforms.

In the light of these considerations, one may question: how can contemporary art practices thrive, under the compulsion of mobility – which, in

reduced physical space and accelerated virtual time, encourages solipsism – and a pressing demand for community engagement?

## Cultural Mobility: Individuals and Communities

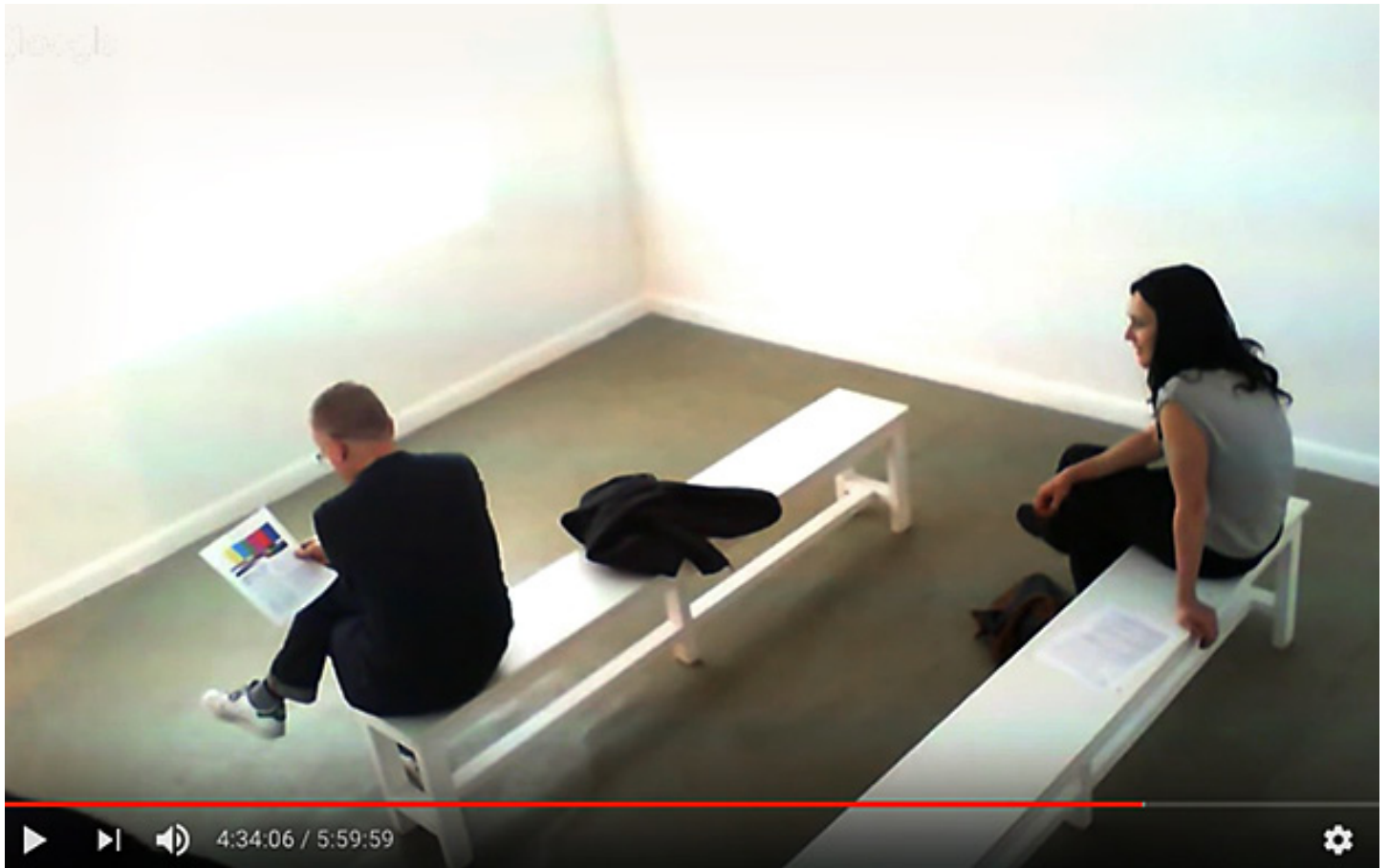
In the identification game of this century, mobility is a strong player. It can be intended as the action of provisional migration from one location to another; on the one hand, a tragic and enforced route – think of the current refugee crisis – and, on the other, a stimulating and needed process – think of the global marketplace, or the constant flux of individuals re-locating for the sake of a more ambitious job, an alternative life-experience or an opportunity for exchange and growth. Sassen has widely articulated this phenomenon, linking the current phase of the

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world's economy to 'the ascendancy of information technologies and the associated increase in the mobility and liquidity of capital.' Her 'global cities' derive from 'cross-border economic processes – flows of capital, labor, goods, raw materials, tourists [...] emerged as a strategic site [...] also for the transnationalization of labor and the formation of translocal communities and identities.' (Sassen, 2005) According to Sassen's analysis, mobility (of people, money, assets) is therefore one of the most influential facets of the globalised world, and the driving force of its systems.

Artists are not immune to the appeal of non-stop travelling. To always be on the move is an imperative to gain





Documentation of *The Narrator Is Present* (2017), by Alison Ballard. Exhibited in *Offline is the New Luxury* at Furtherfield Gallery / live streamed on YouTube, 7-16 April 2017. Courtesy of the artist

the recognition of, and identification with, an outstanding practice. Cultural mobility, 'the temporary cross-border movement of artists and other cultural professionals' (5), has become a buzzing word in various programmes and policies worldwide. Major art events such as biennials, triennials and documenta have built their own reputation on the value of internationalism and cross-cultural representation. (Green and Gardner, 2016) So, it is no coincidence that the popularity of many practitioners relies on the maintenance of an active network, which consequently impacts on their professionalisation.

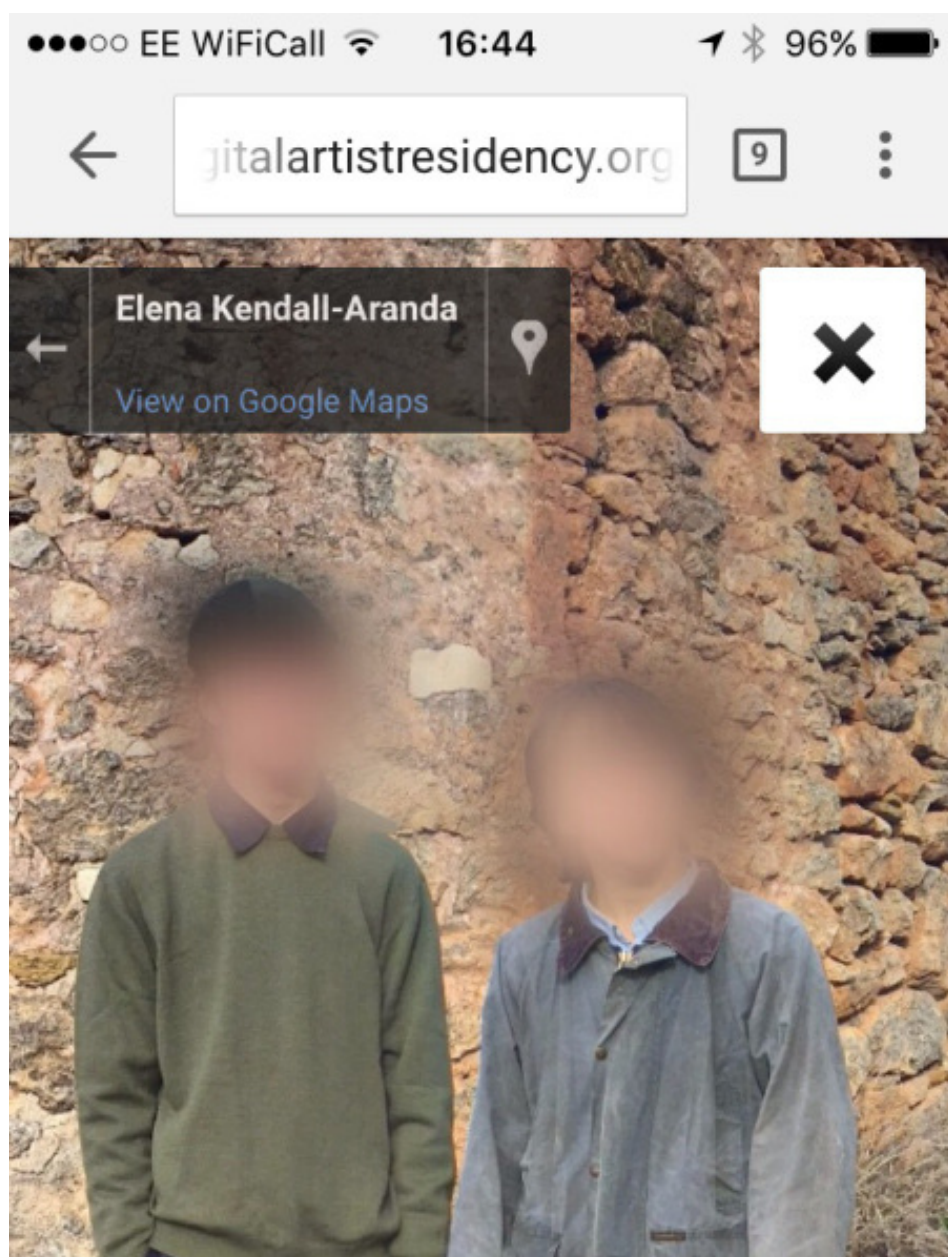
Notwithstanding, it can be argued that both art's professionalisation and cultural mobility have turned 'individual' and 'community' into *false friends*, with their connotation varying significantly in different contexts. In her *Artificial Hells* (2012), Bishop examines the current dichotomy between the professional artist, who is dynamic, networked and acknowledged by the market, and the notions of collectivity and participation, which are being endorsed as the easy-way-out against the logic of capitalism:

*[...] advanced art of the last decade has seen a renewed affirmation of collectivity and a denigration of the individual [...]. In this framework, the virtuosic contemporary artist has become the role model for the flexible, mobile, non-specialised labourer who can*

*creatively adapt to multiple situations, and become his/her own brand. What stands against this model is the collective: collaborative practice is perceived to offer an automatic counter-model of social unity, regardless of its actual politics. (Bishop, 2012, 12)*

Accordingly, 'participation' often turns into an overly abused resolution. Judging from the countless times such a term reappears in press-releases, institutional websites and artist statements, one may conclude that it has lost its true meaning of 'taking part in, sharing something', in favour of the hope of attracting funding. Yet, Bishop continues, participation has the potential to 'rehumanise a society rendered numb and fragmented by the repressive instrumentality of capitalist production.' (Bishop, 2012, 11) So, if on one side is the artist, with the individuality of his/her practice and, on the other, the community he/she has to engage with – a community of spectators, but also galleries, museums and other professionals – is the advocacy for bridging the gap possible?

The state of hyper-reality we live in provides an additional layer of intricacy, since technological tools mediate all encounters, and social interactions are constantly altered by online connection. Thus, the definition of 'individual' and 'community' changes depending on whether communication occurs in a physical or a virtual sphere. In one of his



Still from El Alamin (2016), Google street view interactive artwork, Elena Kendall-Aranda for Digital Artist Residency. Courtesy of the artist

vivid rants on the role of the Internet, Coupland expressed this concept flawlessly: 'It's very hard to imagine phoning someone up and saying: "Hey, come over to my house and we'll sit next to each other on chairs and go online together!" Going online is such an intrinsically solitary act, yet it fosters the creation of groups.' (Coupland, 2016, 49) These groups, within the World Wide Web, originate from shared similarities, curiosities and, of course, likes; which would not necessarily produce the same congregations in a physical context. Moreover, the

online has the potential of augmenting the possibilities of identification by playing with the notion of 'real time'.

The exhibition *Offline is the New Luxury*, recently on display at Furtherfield, London (6), addresses this point by asking the question 'how is [daily technological mediation] affecting our experience of live-ness, presence, and time?' A series of works by artist Alison Ballard explores our relationship with the Internet, and the expansion of time, space and distance, due to the

now-centric nature of contemporary Western culture. The audio work *The Narrator is Present* draws attention to the role of live streaming and the difficulty of distinguishing fictional narrative from truth, among the diversity of voices on the Internet. Visitors to Furtherfield gallery had the possibility to enter the room where the sound installation took place, whilst online participants could simultaneously enjoy the scene – here filled with people, there empty – listening to the audio piece via a web link. The work therefore investigates the twofold dimension of the offline and the online and how they contribute to a single reality – where some are physically together whilst others are present by remotely looking at them. From this perspective, mobility becomes also of time; the instantaneous sharing of every moment, rather than past events, severely influences the way we prioritise both experience and content and, in parallel, the way we identify as 'individual' or 'community'.

### Spaces of Production: The Contemporary Artist's Studio

In such a *mobile* landscape, virtual spaces have no boundaries and physical ones are shrinking. Whereas we have the impression of navigating large webs of connections, in metropolitan areas we occupy claustrophobically smaller places. To a certain extent, this reflects onto the spaces of production: artist studios are often reduced to the dimension of a desk or a computer screen, further turning into mobile platforms themselves. In his introduction to *The Studio* (2012), Hoffmann has claimed:

*Traditionally, the studio has been considered the working space of artists, a place where artworks – conventionally*





BEFORE DOING (2016), Photograph by Giuseppe Lana

*mostly paintings or sculptures – are created. When we think of an artist's studio, many of us perhaps imagine a rather romantic situation with a lonely painter standing in front of a canvas in a small and barely furnished room in an attic or loft, surrounded by splatters of paint, somewhere in Montmartre or Soho. Or the grand workshops of the Dutch or Flemish old masters such as Johannes Vermeer, Jan van Eyck or Peter Paul Rubens, full of assistants and wealthy, aristocratic clients. Or maybe a chaotic and noisy place filled with eccentric characters – a mixture of an advertisement agency, film studio and nightclub, like Andy Warhol's Factory. [However] The moment when the grip of traditional media such as painting and sculpture weakened, the studio in its classic sense began to disappear as well. (Hoffmann, 2012, 12)*

To extend on Hoffmann's line of thoughts, a great number of artists have superseded the devotion to medium-specificity, towards an instrumental use of multiple mediums – and the engagement with digital tools; in parallel, concepts such as fragmentation, hybridisation and acceleration have become recurrent within international exhibitions. Hence, the studio space, generally associated with a place of fabrication and, romantically, with a place of creation, can now also be seen as a place of network, to the point of gaining an

almost immaterial connotation. Undeniably, this is a very contemporary construct. As long ago as 1971, artist Daniel Buren described the studio as a private and motionless entity, where trade and exchange would exclusively occur between the artist and the vested interests of a specialist group:

*A private place, the studio is presided over by the artist-resident, since only that work which he desires and allows to leave his studio will do so. Nevertheless, other operations, indispensable to the functioning of galleries and museums, occur in this private place.*

### **THE IMPACT OF MOBILITY HAS INDEED OPENED MORE DOORS, FROM A SOLO STUDIO ENDEAVOUR TO A POST-STUDIO GROUP MODEL**

*For example, it is here that the art critic, the exhibition organiser, or the museum director or curator may calmly choose among the works presented by the artist those to be included in this or that exhibition, this or that collection, this or that gallery. The studio is thus a convenience for the organizer: he may compose his exhibition according to his own desire (and not that of the artist, although the artist is usually perfectly content to leave well enough alone, satisfied with the prospect of an exhibition). Thus*

*chance is minimized, since the organizer has not only selected the artist in advance, but also selects the works he desires in the studio itself. The studio is thus also a boutique where we find ready-to-wear art. (Buren, 1971, 52)*

This view of the studio as a sort of commercial repository, a 'stationary' place, where works are judged and then hopefully sold to museums and private collectors, is not fully exhaustive. As Buren himself confessed at the conclusion of his text, without proper acknowledgement of the studio, artworks would be deprived from their most vital characteristic and essence, which lie in the process of making. This highlights the importance of such spaces of production that, despite their mutable character – today not necessarily confined within the perimeter of four walls – remain crucial for the development of art systems and practices. The impact of mobility has indeed opened more doors, 'from a solo studio endeavour to a post-studio group model' – as McMeans (2014) argues. According to her research, there is a growing tendency for artists to develop joint studio practices, as specific to residencies, which meet the needs of the dynamism and spatial-temporal fluidity previously described. In particular, McMeans refers to artist residencies as facilitators of this pop-up, group-studio, which happens to have a rhizomatic quality, in the way Deleuze and Guattari would intend it. In their *A Thousand Plateaus* the French theorists defined a rhizome as it follows:

*[...] unlike trees or their roots, the rhizome connects any point to any other point, and its traits are not necessarily linked to traits of the same nature; it brings into play very different regimes of signs, and even nonsign states. [...] Unlike the graphic arts, drawing or photography, unlike tracings, the rhizome pertains to a map that must be produced, constructed, a map that is always detachable, connectable, reversible, modifiable, and has multiple entrance-*

*ways and exits and its own lines of flight. (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, 21)*

Based on this parallelism, a rhizomatic studio – 'that which 1) operates outside an institutional framework; 2) is always a temporary event; 3) operates only from the middle; 4) sends out off-shoots; and 5) has multiple entry-ways' (McMeans, 2014) – pinpoints the predominance of an interdisciplinary and not hierarchical approach towards the evolution of art practices, as opposed to that of conventional art institutions. In other words, mobile studios for a community of artists – a community of interests – represent the contemporary evolution of the most traditional space of production. An organisation that gives great importance to the convivial aspect of the studio is Delfina Foundation, London. Active from 2007 – with a historical record in providing studio spaces to artists since 1988 – they facilitate exchange and artists' mobility through a series of curated, thematic programmes, where international practitioners are invited to explore common ideas and develop partnerships in a joint environment. Privacy is here replaced by the open quality of hospitality, which depends on the act of giving-while-receiving as the touchstone of social bonds.

To provide an example drawn from my personal experience, in November 2016, I co-curated a project consisting in what my colleague Amy E. Brown and I named as a studio-practice, rather than an exhibition. Alongside artist Giuseppe Lana, we embarked in a journey to explore the notion of 'un-

realised projects' during a month-long residency at Five Years, London. We departed from the consideration that, whilst the studio is the place where thoughts are formulated and evolve, the inevitable separation between the artistic process and the final result implies that not all ideas translate into finished works (7). Recollecting Socrates' predilection for active dialogue, as the only way to foster knowledge, we engaged in interminable brain-

storming sessions and conversations. The studio – which at times happened to be a couch at the artist's house, others a rented car transporting objects and thoughts across the city – became a platform for discussion: the residence of

a discursive, collaborative experience, which would inform the realisation of an idea. With this in mind, mobility – in its pure meaning of movement and action – was the driving force of the studio-residency; that which allowed the identification process from immaterial thought to material result to take place, and the collective thinking between the artist and us, the curators, to unfold. Shared research and development are therefore key aspects of the mobile studio-residency, where existing identities intermingle, and new, transcultural, ones are borne in a critical setting.

## MOBILE STUDIOS FOR A COMMUNITY OF ARTISTS REPRESENT THE CONTEMPORARY EVOLUTION OF THE MOST TRADITIONAL SPACE OF PRODUCTION

### The Artist Residency: Offline and Online

In their *Periodising Collectivism* (2004), Sholette and Stimson claimed: 'in a world all but totally subjugated by the commodity form and the spectacle it generates, the only remaining theatre



of action is direct engagement with the forces of production.’ (Sholette and Stimson, 2004, 582) Residencies – from the Latin *residère*: to reside, to occupy, to settle in a specific place – embody this type of interaction, by engaging with social life as the vehicle for expression. Contrary to what many might think, the residency is not a contemporary phenomenon. Its origins can be dated back to the 1663 Prix de Rome: a scholarship to travel to the French Academy in Rome (currently Villa Medici), awarded to art students of the Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture, under the reign of Louis XIV. From the end of the 19th century this custom spread also in the United States and, at the beginning of the 20th century, it evolved into patronage, often comprising sponsors and the provision of studio spaces to talented artists. Of 1900 is Yaddo, an artists’ community – among the first ones of its type – located on a 400-acre estate in Saratoga Springs, New York. With the mission of nurturing the creative process of artists, who can work without impediment in a supportive environment, Yaddo has developed and grown. At present, it offers residencies to international practitioners working across different mediums.

But seclusion and isolation from the outside world – to stimulate creativity in a utopic environment – are not the exclusive goals of residencies. Around the 1960s, in fact, a new model emerged, aiming for social action and public involvement. Guest studios in urban areas became the starting point to activate political change. These initiatives, expanding over the 1970s and 1980s, created the basis for a new wave of residency programmes eventually proliferating in the 1990s, at the outset of globalisation and in the name of diversity (8). The new tendency was

to cross the western borders, invading the globe: from Brazil to Taiwan, from Estonia to Cameroon, from Japan to Vietnam. A common feature, and one of the aims of the initiators of these programmes, was to be grassroots and alternative, in order for the participants to experiment and engage in the production of knowledge on a local level – often in contrast with the mainstream art scene. (La Rosa, 2015) Today, residencies represent an important step in the career of both artists and curators: a key factor for professional development, expanding networks and encouraging cultural mobility across countries (9). They are generally identified by a series of components including a studio space, opportunity to exhibit and living accommodation. Participants may also be offered a fee to deliver an exhibition or a series of events at the conclusion of their stay.

On the occasion of a previous study (2015), I investigated contemporary forms of residencies, which can be grouped into three categories: ‘the academic model (facilitated as academic bases of artistic research and creative production); the community art model (taking the form of a community art centre designed to contribute to local development); and the event-based model (organized as part of international festivals/exhibitions etc.)’ (10) To these, Tatsuhiko Murata, co-director of Youkobo Art Space in Japan, juxtaposes the ‘microresidencies’: small in scale, independent, grassroots and flexible, with an eye to valuing artist’s needs and human relationships. The latter became a source of inspiration for a project I co-curated in 2015, namely *LIMITACTION*: a six-month residency programme in the Window Space, London. Artist Charlotte Warne Thomas was invited

to occupy the gallery-space, a vitrine (11), turning it into her studio, with the aim to display the process of art making rather than mere objects of art. Alongside other issues (12), this project challenged the traditional understanding of residency, as anchored on geographical mobility – since both artist and curators were London-based – and the idea of the studio as a solely private place. The residency, in fact, developed into what we would have later defined ‘a collaborative space of change:’ a symbol for discussion, like in the context of a roundtable. As Chenal articulates, a further type of residencies, ‘secular residencies’, takes place in commercial buildings, airports, hospitals, shops, private houses, etc. These programmes overturn the most conventional concepts of physical mobility and material space:

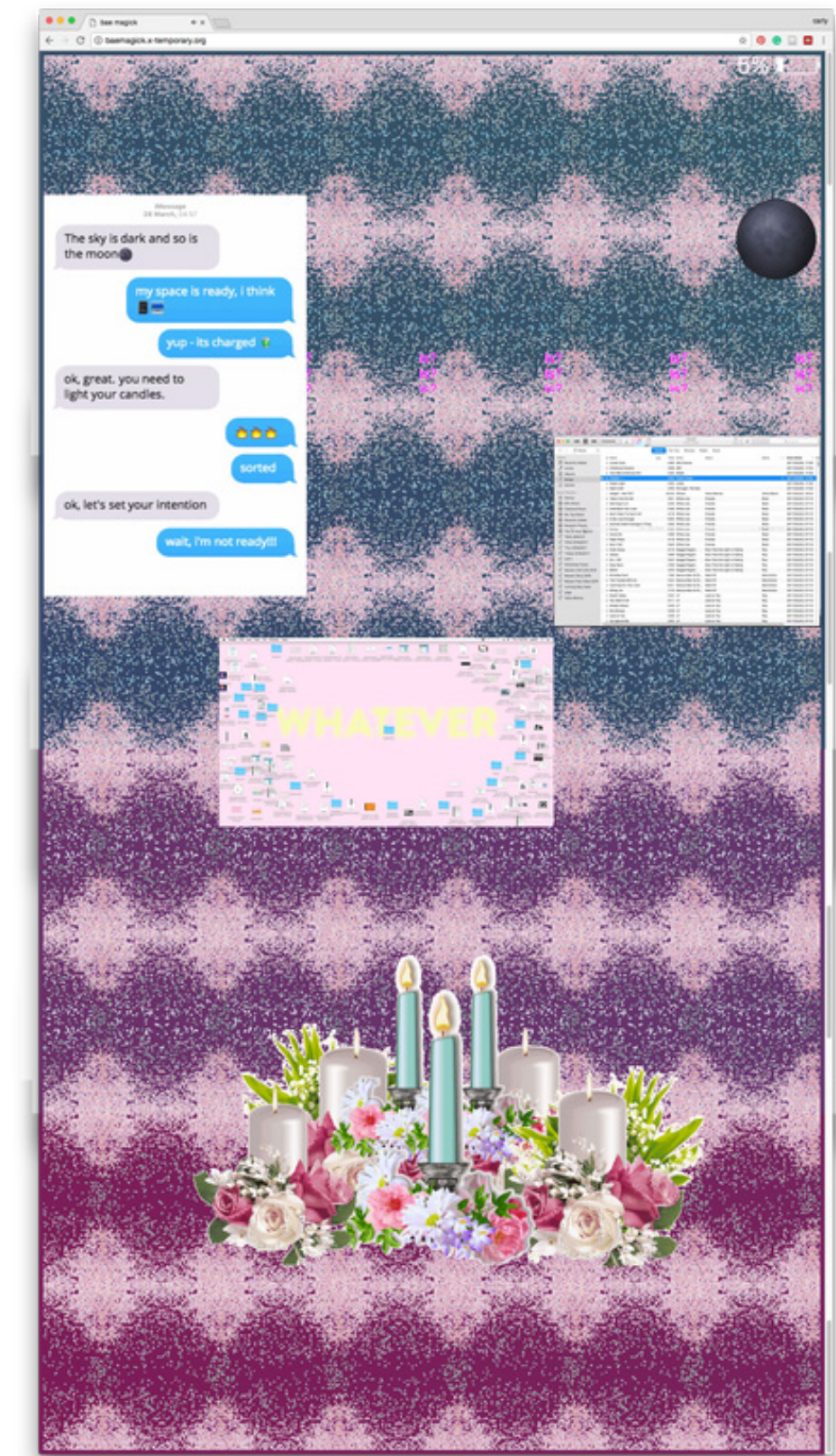
The role of artists in our societies has changed and is changing. Artists are called upon to intervene in all kinds of social contexts, especially where politicians and social workers have failed. They are expected to unveil new realities, bring people together in communities, contribute to inclusive policies, and so on. [...] Related to this is the desire to re-connect art and artists with the social environment. There is, too, a growing interest in the creative, economic impact of arts and culture. Artists’ residencies are becoming part of the panoply of cultural policies for local development. And even if concrete outcomes are less visible than with arts festivals and events, residencies give both artists and host a sense of duration, of process and of sustainability. These developments mean that the concept of residency is no longer automatically associated with geographical mobility. A residency used to be about going ‘somewhere else’, usually beyond one’s



own country. Now residencies can take artists directly into their own environment, their own cities or towns. They still experience difference there, but the challenges come not from working far away but from being in totally different contexts, professionally, scientifically, politically. 'Otherness' can be, in terms of distance, very close. As one artist at the Residency Cairo Symposium put it: "I could even go in residence in my own home. It is not about distance or unusual environment: it is a state of mind!" (Chenal, 2009)

A thought-provoking case in this regard is the 'uninvited residency': a project developed by artist and curator Sam Curtis. To sustain his studies at Goldsmiths College, London, Curtis used to work as a fishmonger at Harrods. Moved by economic reasons, he turned what originally was a side job into an opportunity to develop a community-art project, drawing a parallelism between wage labour and artistic labour. He filmed his practice as a fishmonger and his interaction with the community of customers and colleagues, literally transforming his daily activity into a work of art. Curtis's 'uninvited residency' draws attention to a fundamental aspect of residencies, what Zizlsperger outlines as the impelling necessity to promote 'exchange, change and growth,' (Zizlsperger, 2016, viii) in an environment that would otherwise obstruct the dissemination of contemporary art practices.

This point further endorses the idea that, today, 'in residence' can infer your residency within the same locality, as well as in the more ephemeral scenery of the digital. The format of online residencies is indeed rapidly growing (13), encouraging mobility of content for those artists whose prac-



New Moon (2017), Bae Magick, Carly Whitaker for x-temporary. Courtesy of the artist

tice encompasses time-based media and the use of the Internet. Examples can be found in the Digital Artist Residency directed by artist and curator Tom Milnes, or in x-temporary.org, run by curator Marenka Krasomil. The first is 'an online platform [...]

providing support and online space for artists to develop processes which do not require a physical space and work within digital or online contexts.' (Milnes, 2015) The second, operating under a similar ethos, promotes the exchange of ideas, free

access to content and emphasis on process. Undoubtedly, programmes of this kind show a truly contemporary appreciation of mobility – where the Digital Artist Residency keeps an archive of all artworks, x-temporary.org is instead based on temporary contributions meant to disappear once the project ends. Though they both facilitate identification between specific communities of interest in a way that ensures a more immediate access than many traditional programmes. (14)

Online residencies raise questions on the notion of artistic labour and the currency and value behind open source: how is it possible to give weight to production and process on the Internet? In addition, one may wonder how these programmes conform to the notion of hospitality, vital for the exchange of narratives in a communal context. Arguably, hospitality is something extremely ‘human’ that the virtual will never be able to recreate in its complexity. To accommodate and develop time-based installations on a website surely is a form of residential activity, one that however unfolds within a very specific layer of the shared experience: from individual (artist) to worldwide community. On the contrary, if thinking of the Internet as ‘the studio’ with a possibility for unrestricted crosspollination of content, the online residency conquers the characteristic of – expanded – social space of production; yet remaining that immaterial, portable and alive entity we advocated for. With this in mind, we cannot deny the role of online residencies in promoting the digital proliferation of art and the development of artistic practices. What still remains to be verified is the degree of impact that uncontrolled interaction can provoke. But following Derrida’s perspective, the very act of

selecting and filtering is in contradiction with true hospitality:

This collusion is also power in its finitude, which is to say the necessity, for the host, for the one who receives, of choosing, electing, filtering, selecting their invitees, visitors, or guests, those to whom they decide to grant asylum, the right of visiting, or hospitality. No hospitality, in the classic sense, without sovereignty of oneself over one’s home, but since there is also no hospitality without finitude, sovereignty can only be exercised by filtering, choosing, and thus by excluding and doing violence. (Derrida, 2000, 55)

Hospitality indeed entails the creation of free space where the stranger can enter and become a friend, a companion, rather than an enemy. After all, we live in the age of boundless information, mass-migration and real-time (alternative) facts. To put spatial-temporal limitations to the places of artistic production would be meaningless, if not impossible.

## Conclusion

This paper has proposed a view of the residency as metaphor for a collaborative space of change, a discursive site and a contact point for a critical exchange of artistic practices. Whether manifesting in a physical or digital setting, residency is synonymous with the temporary inhabiting and the lasting encounter of different narratives, in ever-new contexts. Whereas cultural mobility has become an impelling demand in the 21st century, one may go on residence in the same city, on a website, or in another continent, as development and evolution can literally occur anywhere. At the basis of such journey lays the opportunity to

form a mobile identity that – unlikely a fixed one – grows and unfolds in a constant tension between ‘I’ and ‘we’, ‘individual’ and ‘community’. The conviviality of the group, in fact, provides those who are part of it with a sense of belonging, which is essential to the flourishing of any form of identification. Ultimately, a place of production does not need to be filled with tangible matters to unveil its intrinsic power of locus of reflection and revolution. ‘In residence’ can imply for one to examine his/her self, and the social role of his/her action, in as many dimensions as a contemporary understanding of reality requires.

■ MIRIAM LA ROSA

## Notes:

1 - Anne Dufourmantelle and Jacques Derrida. 2000. *Of Hospitality*. Anne Dufourmantelle invites Jacques Derrida to respond (Stanford: Stanford University Press), 25-47/48.

2 - Black’s text was published on the 21st of March 2017, in the form of an open letter to the curators of the Whitney Biennial, on the writer’s blog: <http://blackcontemporaryart.tumblr.com/post/158661755087/submission-please-read-share-hannah-blacks>. Accessed April 19, 2017.

3 - As O’Farrell highlights, it is important to remember that ‘Foucault himself favours the dissolution of identity, rather than its creation or maintenance. He sees identity as a form of subjugation and a way of exercising power over people and preventing them from moving outside fixed boundaries.’ <http://www.michel-foucault.com/concepts/>. Accessed April 16, 2017.

4 - A brief history of residencies is presented in the chapter *The Artist Residency: Offline and Online* of this paper. For a more comprehensive account see: Miriam La Rosa. 2015. “Introduction” in Margarida B. Amorim, Alejandro Ball, Miriam La Rosa and Stefania Sorrentino. 2015. *IN TRANSITION: the artistic and curatorial residency*. (London: CtC Press), 4-11.





5 - This definition of cultural mobility is that adopted by the platform On the Move, as defined by the 2008 EricArts Study, *Mobility Matters*: <http://on-the-move.org/about/mission/culturalmobility>. Accessed April 16, 2017.

6 - The exhibition was on display from the 7th to the 16th of April 2017. <http://furtherfield.org/programmes/exhibition/offline-new-luxury>. Accessed April 10, 2017.

7 - In this regard, Lefebvre stated: 'It is never easy to get back from the object (product or work) to the activity that produced and or created it. It is the only way, however, to illuminate the object's nature, or, if you will, the object's relationship to nature, and reconstitute the process of its genesis and the development of its meaning.' (Lefebvre, 1974, 113)

8 - In 1993, it was founded ResArtis, the oldest, internationally acknowledged 'worldwide network of artist residencies.' <http://www.resartis.org>. Accessed March 22, 2017.

9 - In Europe, for instance, specific residency programmes result from agreements between different cities and countries. Talking about the Istanbul's scene, Zizlsperger explains that: 'Artist residencies are a relatively recent development in Turkey and initially began as agreements between Istanbul and various European cities. The Berlin Senate programme, one such residency that was founded in 1989, was the first of its kind in Istanbul and has hosted two Berlin artists every year since its inception.' (Anna Zizlsperger. 2016. "Engaging Istanbul. An essay on Exchange, Change and Growth." In *Exhibist. International Art From Turkey*. January 2016. (Istanbul: Scala Matbaa), ii – viii. A more recent example of such exchanges was the Global Art Programme (GAP) – Waiting for Expo 2015, a series of exchange residencies between Italy and many other countries, created in partnership with the universal Expo 2015 of Milan.

10 - These categories are often organised through public establishments in connection with the national or local authorities. [http://www.youkobo.co.jp/microresidence/microresidence\\_2012.pdf](http://www.youkobo.co.jp/microresidence/microresidence_2012.pdf). Accessed: April 17, 2017.

11 - This is a gallery with no physical access for the public, other than the possibility to observe from the viewpoint of the street.

12 - Through an opening-event taking place

every month, we explored a series of limitations of that specific locale: namely accessibility, privacy, freedom and space. The project culminated with the roundtable IN TRANSITION: the artistic and curatorial residency, at Whitechapel Gallery, London, in conjunction with the launch of the eponymous publication. The latter investigates both historical and contemporary relevance of residencies through commissioned essays and interviews with artists and curators.

13 - In 2014, for instance, Chisenhale Gallery, London, launched an Instagram Residency, where artists are periodically invited to take over their Instagram account and use it as a medium for the making of work. <https://www.instagram.com/chisenhalegallery/>. Accessed April 19, 2017.

14 - Here, we refer to cases where residents operate as monads within the ivory tower of the institution to only present a product to the public in the form of a final exhibition.

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## MIRIAM LA ROSA

MIRIAM LA ROSA IS SENIOR RESEARCHER AT THE ART CONSULTANCY AGENCY MONTABONEL & PARTNERS, WHERE SHE ENGAGES IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF PROJECTS SUCH AS PUBLICATIONS, EXHIBITIONS AND INTERNATIONAL SYMPOSIA. WITH AN ACADEMIC BACKGROUND IN CURATING, MUSEOLOGY AND ART HISTORY, MIRIAM HAS CURATED VARIOUS EXHIBITIONS AND EVENTS BETWEEN THE UK AND ITALY, AND WORKED IN INSTITUTIONS INCLUDING WHITECHAPEL GALLERY, LONDON, STEDELIJK MUSEUM, AMSTERDAM AND VAN ABBEMUSEUM, EINDHOVEN. SHE IS CURRENTLY PART OF THE ARTIST-RUN SPACE FIVE YEARS, LONDON, AND MEMBER OF THE EDITORIAL TEAM OF CTC (CURATINGTHECONTEMPORARY.ORG): AN ONLINE PUBLISHING PLATFORM SHE CO-FOUNDED IN 2013



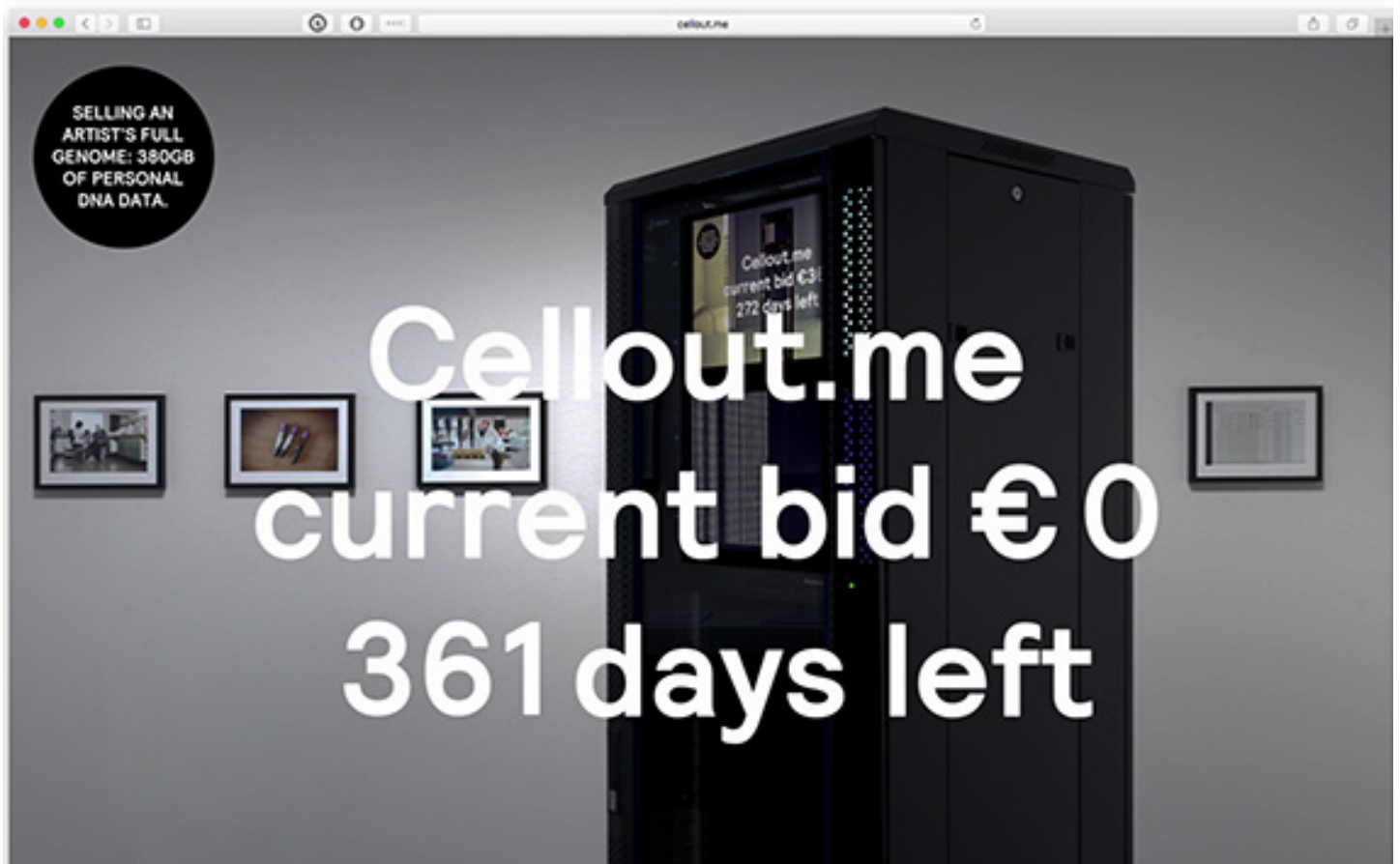


# SELLING MY FULL GENOME TO THE HIGHEST BIDDER USING ART TO EXPAND THE DISCOURSE SURROUNDING DNA DATA

by Jeroen Van Loon

“In short, ladies and gentlemen, my message today is that data is gold.”





www.cellout.me screenshot, taken on 27-09-2015. Photo courtesy of the artist

In 2016, I sold my entire DNA profile to the highest bidder online. Therefore I am no longer the sole owner of my DNA data. This sale was at the core of my artwork cellout.me (2015-2016). In this article, I'll give an overview of different perspectives from which thinking about the selling of human DNA data can be done. I will do this by first writing about why I sold my DNA data and why I believe it matters. Secondly, I will provide perspectives on selling DNA data from an artistic, ethical, economic and cyber security-related points of view, written by experts from those respective fields. Finally, I will conclude with my personal thoughts concerning the value of my sold DNA data. This article can be seen as a way to expand the discourse surrounding DNA data through the use of art. I'm an artist from the Netherlands and for some years now, I have been creating artworks that document, visualize or reveal contemporary and future digital culture. My goal is not to create art using the newest technological or digital tools, but to show how these tools create the digital cultures we inhabit and to wonder how they (and we) will change in the future.

### Cellout.me

Cellout.me was created in 2015 for the biannual exhibition Art along the Schinkel in Amsterdam. With Cellout.

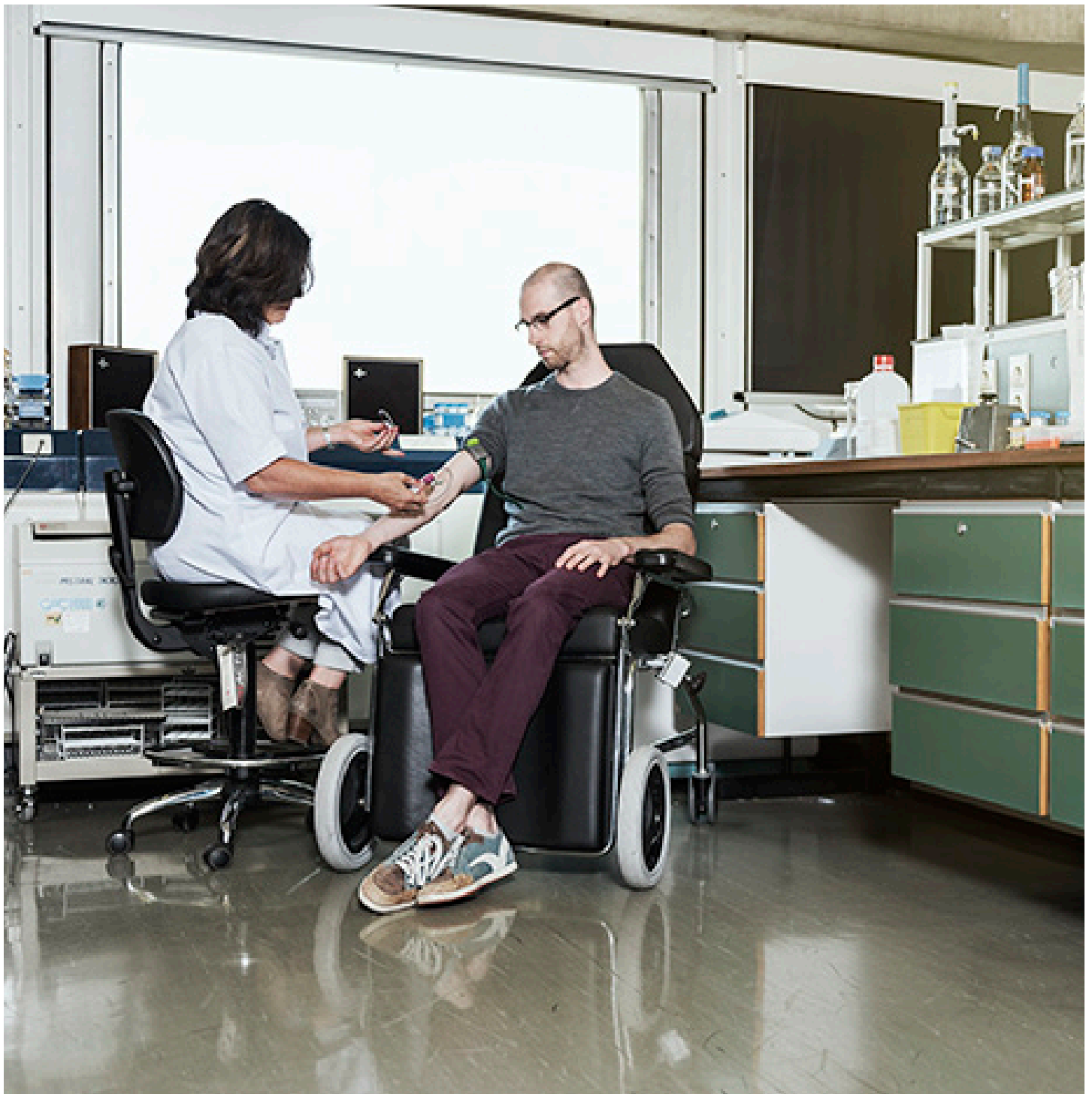
me, I offered my full genome - 380gb of personal DNA data - for sale, online, for one year. The auction ended at midnight on September 27th, 2016. Anybody could place a bid through [www.cellout.me](http://www.cellout.me). The buyer would own an extremely personal 'self-portrait', in the most modern medium: 3 billion lines of code, consisting of As, Ts, Cs or Gs which together make up my genetic blueprint and hold all my hereditary information - including partly that of my son, sister, parents and grandmother. The DNA data was of official laboratory quality, meaning it was sequenced with a 30-fold coverage depth.

The artwork cellout.me consists of four parts:

- 1 - The server cabinet which houses a server that stores my DNA data and a screen showing the raw DNA data, line by line.
- 2 - Seven framed photographs which show the blood-to-data process.
- 3 - Four framed letters that broaden the discourse on selling human DNA data.
- 4 - The [www.cellout.me](http://www.cellout.me) website.

Placing a bid meant placing a bid on the entire artwork. Twenty-two bids were placed during the entire year. On September 27th, 2016, in the final 30 minutes of the auc-





Generating blood samples at Erasmus Medical Center, The Netherlands. Photo by Erik Bos

tion, there were four different parties, both commercial and cultural, who were bidding against each other. At midnight, Belgian art collector Geert Verbeke had the highest bid. As a result, he now owns Cellout.me and my DNA data. Cellout.me was sold for €1100 and is currently exhibited at the Verbeke Foundation museum.

### The path of least resistance

The idea behind Cellout.me was that, by turning DNA data into a commodity, the artwork would pull future digital culture into the present, asking new questions concerning

authorship, copyright, privacy, big data and ethics. DNA sequencing technology is becoming cheaper, easier and more widely available each day. This means that biology is converted into binary data. Contrary to our actual DNA, DNA data is stored outside the human body. Access to this data isn't automatically controlled by its (original) owner. The data can be copied, manipulated, shared, sold, bought, and so on and so forth.

Before the arrival of binary code, each type of content had its own container, like, for instance, an LP, a CD, a book, a printed photograph or a VHS tape. Not only did content

have its own container, most of the time it also had its own presentation device that gave the public access to the content. There were different devices for different types of content. Of course, the content on these containers could be copied, but the physicality of the containers, and its devices for presentation, made it harder for the content to go places that it wasn't designed to go. All of this changed with the use of binary code. Binary code doesn't need different devices for different types of content. If you have a device that can read binary code, you can view images, read texts, watch videos, play games or create your own content. Furthermore, with the arrival of the internet, binary code became like water in rivers, pools and oceans, seemingly flowing from one place to another, the combination of all of the streams creating one big global ocean. The water - or data - evaporates, forms a cloud, turns into rain and returns to the rivers, lakes or oceans, now in different places and in different shapes.

Each time content is transformed into binary code, the same issues with copyright, privacy and authorship tend to arise. We saw what happened when downloading was introduced, when p2p networks were created and when live streaming sites emerged. Questions of who owns what content became more complex, questions about what the original is became obsolete, and questions about when to pay for digital content became almost non-existent. Binary code follows the path of least resistance.

I believe the same happens with biological DNA, once it's transformed into binary code. Until now, DNA was stored safely inside your own biological 'presentation device', the body,

where it remained private, inaccessible and anti-viral, if you will. Results of genetic testing and screenings have an associated or relational quality, so that their relevance is not limited to the individual but could extend to biological relatives. Perhaps in a few years, your doctor (or someone else) will sequence your DNA through their MinION. Will you be able to receive and own that sequenced data? Companies like 23andme.com are already analyzing your DNA for you, while storing your (or is it theirs?) data in their datacenters, selling its access to third parties. DNA data is the new frontier when it comes to questions concerning authorship, copyright or privacy; it goes far beyond Facebook likes or online cookies. Who knows where your DNA data will go, into which rivers, lakes or oceans and who will access, copy and use it?

### Using art to expand discourse

Selling my DNA data is a work of art, meaning that it is completely useless and bears no actual function other than trying to reveal a digital culture in which selling (human) DNA data is an accepted custom. If, as Neelie Kroes, former European Commissioner for Digital Agenda, stated, data is the new gold, the first question that arises is: what is the value of DNA data? Does it have different values for different people? Does DNA data have an intrinsic value, and if so, to whom and why? Is it even fair to compare biological DNA to DNA data? And if it can be sold, whose is it to sell? Mine? Or do I need to include my family? Speaking of family, how does selling my DNA data influence the privacy of me and my family members?

As an artist, I have no interest in actually providing answers to all these

questions; as I've said before, I try to reveal future digital culture. I want to create art that triggers new questions and perspectives. To expand on this, I've asked four people, each with a different professional background (in arts, ethics, economics and cyber security), to give their view on selling human DNA data.

### Art

*A perspective on Cellout.me by Peter van der Graaf, Head of Department, Post-War and Contemporary Art at Christie's Amsterdam.*

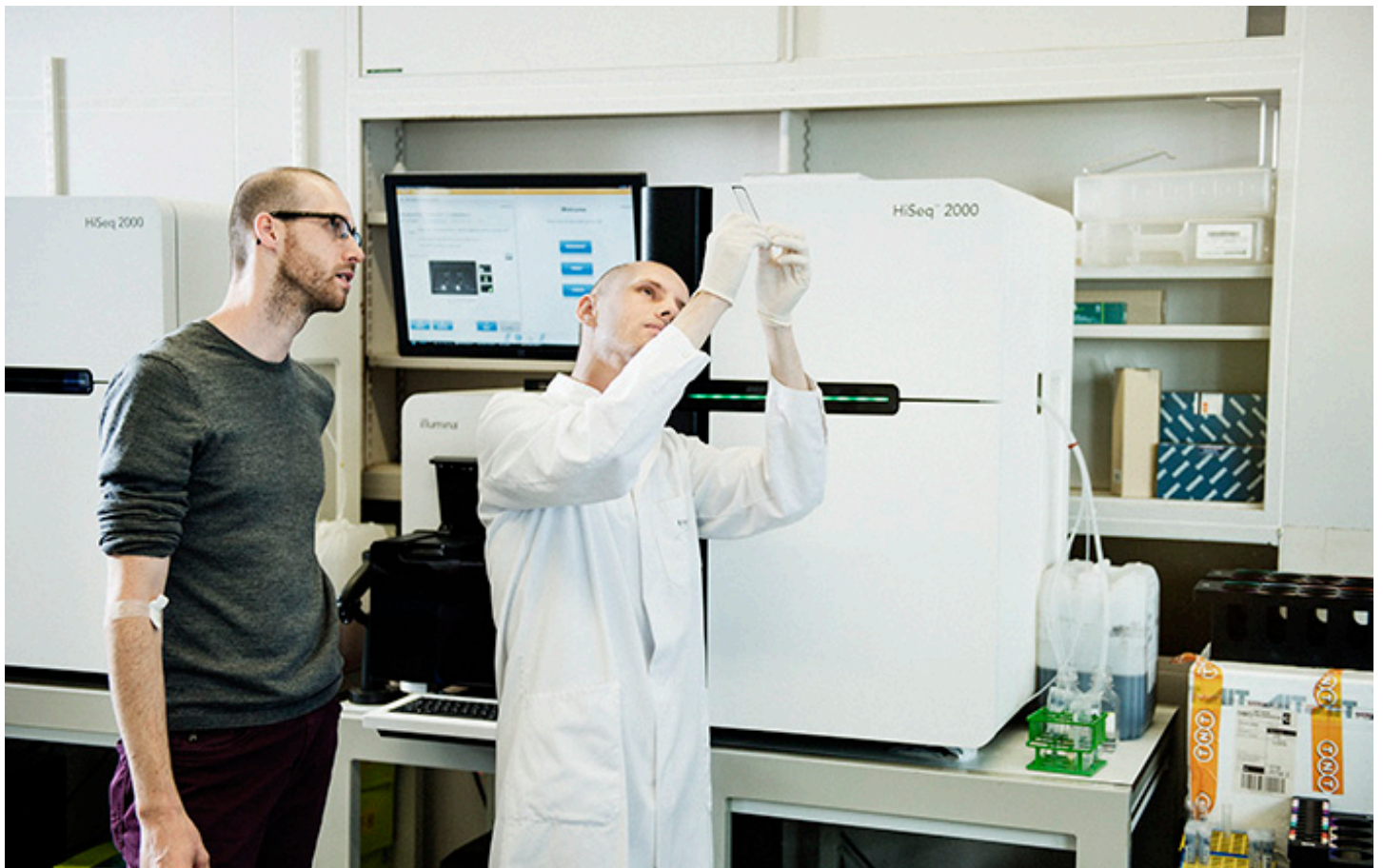
What is the value of a person's DNA? Or more specifically, what is the value of Jeroen van Loon's DNA?

If we want information about a person, we can find a great deal in his past: physical traits, antecedents and medical records can provide insight. However, when it comes to the 'appraisal' of the DNA, virtually every eld involved focuses on the information that it may contain about the future of its 'owner'. The added value, then, is in its ability to predict. For instance, the genetic information can indicate a predisposition for certain diseases, or possible benefits of talents that are apparently innate, but have not yet been tapped.

An art appraiser, on the other hand, almost always works from a historical perspective. While the media tell us that 'past results are no guarantee for the future', it is precisely these past results that determine the value of a work of art. This does not mean that financial value cannot be attributed to works of art that have yet to prove their quality. It is known that Rembrandt used to sell shares in paintings that he had yet to paint. A commis-







DNA goes into the HiSeq sequencer for two weeks. Photo by Erik Bos

sioner that pays for a work of art in advance is effectively taking an option on the future.

The way a work of art is received is different for every person, and so appreciating the work of art is a subjective process. However, our environment definitely creates a collective sense of taste. It is the appraiser's job to recognize this collective sense of taste and to express it in a financial value. A good expert always asks himself questions: what do I see? Who has made the thing that I see? When was this work of art made? How can I place it in the artist's body of work? What is the artist's track record? How does this work relate to the time period in which it was made? How does it relate to the current time period? What is the work's history (provenance, references in literature and/or exhibition history)? Does this history add value? Who will buy the work and what will he or she pay for it?

As far as the Cellout.me project is concerned, I am forced to conclude that almost all of these questions are difficult to answer. Appraising conceptual art has proven to be a challenge before. When an artist no longer sees the eventual physical appearance of his work of art as the end goal, but rather as a means to represent his idea, this makes appraising the work difficult, because the thing that is eventually purchased is not necessarily the final product. In some cases, the final product is not tangible, or the work of art is nothing more than a moment in the past, as is the case with performance art. But there are solutions to this problem; for example, one can purchase the rights to perform a piece, which have a determined financial value.

Cellout.me, however, also goes beyond the criteria that have been placed on appraising conceptual art: the artist does more than just offer a conceptual

work of art. Through data analysis, the new owner of Van Loon's DNA may be able to know everything about the artist's creative brain in the future. Collectors often want to get as close to the artist's psyche as possible, in order to try to understand his creative urges and powers. Perhaps, Jeroen van Loon offers the possibility to analyze the artist's mind more thoroughly than ever.

If the value of this work of art is to be determined, the following question arises: in what way is Jeroen van Loon's DNA worth more than that of other people? Is an artist's DNA more valuable than that of an 'average' mortal? In comparison, artist Piero Manzoni decided to investigate the possible added value of being an artist in 1961, by canning his own faeces. He offered this *Merde d'Artiste* for sale, for the same price as gold at the time. By doing this, he wanted to demonstrate that even the faeces of an artist

like Manzoni is of immense value. And he turned out to be right: in 2014, at an auction in New York, one of the cans sold for over \$200,000.

If Jeroen van Loon's works turn out to be the ultimate cultural-historical registrations of the developments within the field of genetics, he will be regarded, in a few decades, as a tremendously important part of art history. This may make the Cellout.me art project into a very valuable cultural icon. What is the value of Jeroen van Loon's DNA? As I have said before, past results are no guarantee for the future. But if financial value can be attributed to Manzoni's excrements, at what price will Jeroen van Loon in his entirety sell?

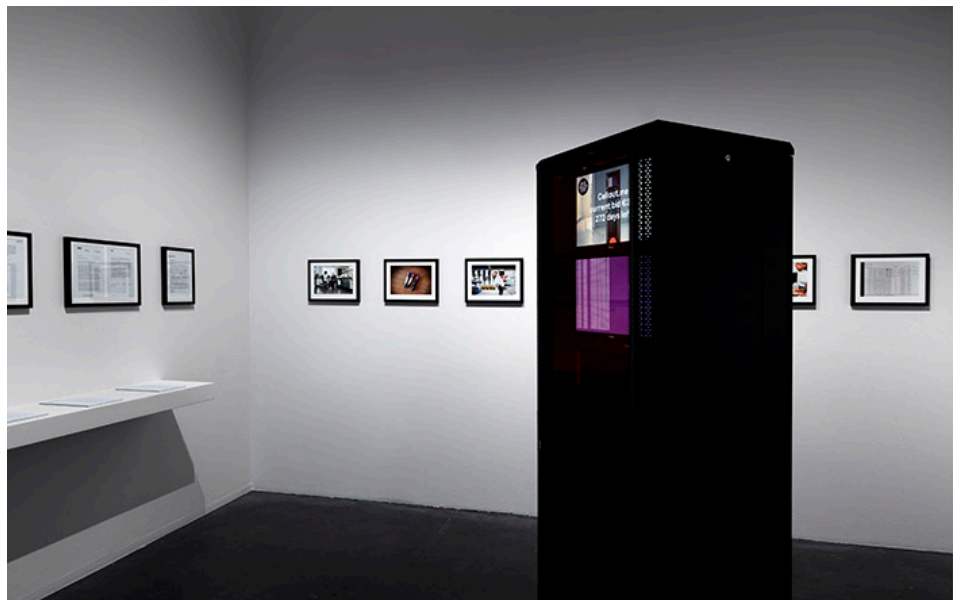
## Ethics

*A perspective on Cellout.me by bioethicist Eline Bunnik, affiliated with Erasmus MC, Department of Medical Ethics and Philosophy of Medicine.*

### Appreciating DNA

On the moral value of one complete human genome

Over the past decades scientists all over the world have placed strong bets on genome research and genome technology, under the assumption that the genome contained the blueprint of human life. They thought that, once they were able to 'read' DNA, they would be able to predict where our human weaknesses lie, which diseases will affect us, what it is that will eventually kill us. Human kind would gain insight into its future. But can we truly know our future, and do we really want to? How can we live, for instance, knowing that we will develop Alzheimer's disease, a disease for which there is no cure? Is getting



Installation view, "Beyond Data" Centraal Museum, photo by Gert-Jan van Rooij

to know our own DNA really such a good idea? What moral value does the genome have for us?

If we ask questions about the 'moral value' of our DNA, what kind of value are we talking about?

At least three kinds of values are of relevance: informative value, worthiness of protection, and symbolic value.

If we determine the sequence of the three billion base pairs and then

look at them, they do not tell us anything. The sequence looks more or less like this: CTCCTCCTCATCTTCGT-CACGGTCTCCTCGCTTTCGCTA-GCTCGCTTGCTTGCTGG. A sequence is nothing but data: it is not informative yet. The genome gets its informative value through analysis and interpretation. We can only predict hereditary traits, physical traits, or risk of diseases, if we can 'read' the genome.

Though scientists have become better and better at reading the genome, they have not become much wiser. Once read, the genome turns out to

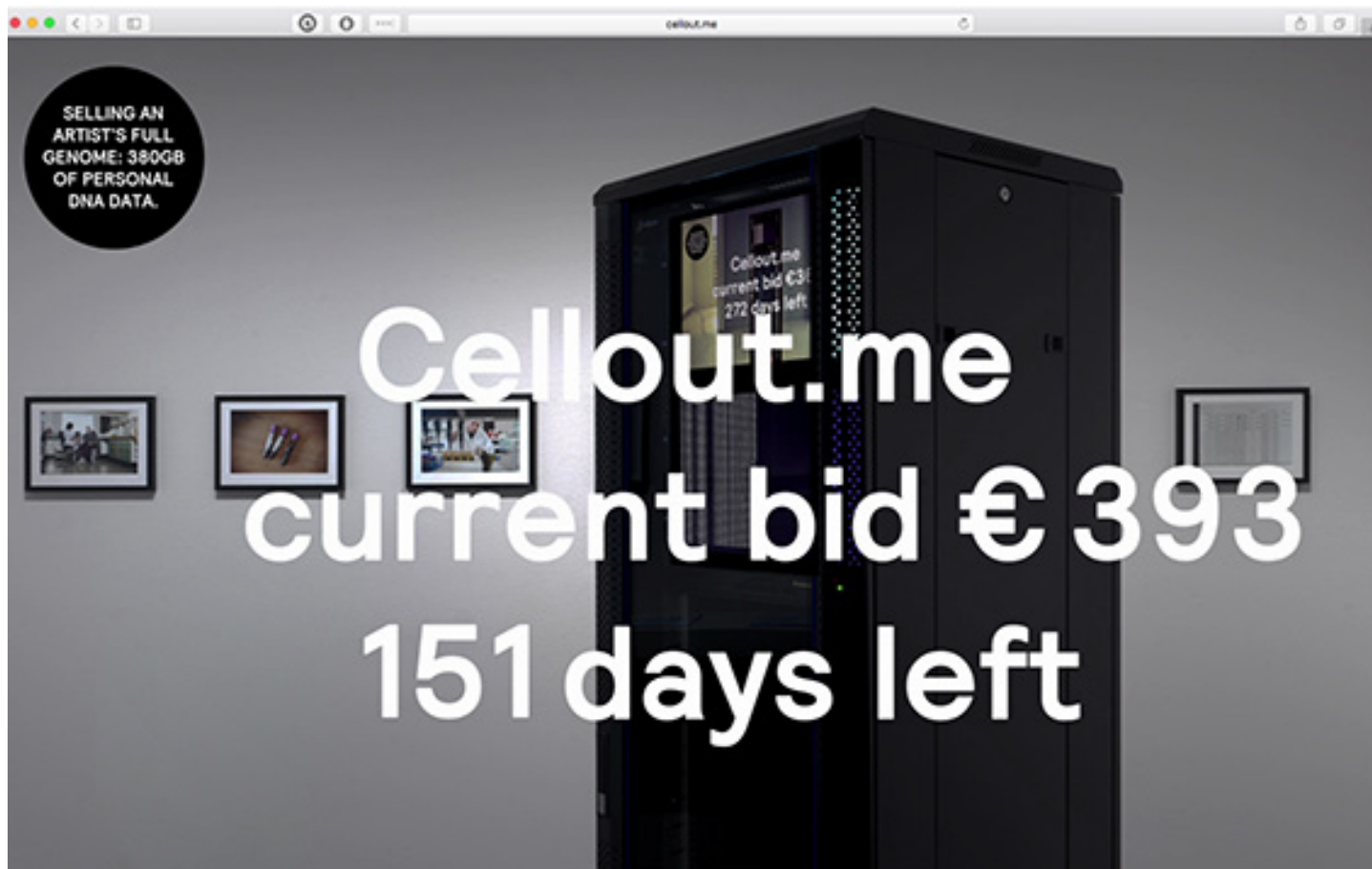
contain much less usable information than previously assumed. For the most part, the predictive value of the sequence is rather limited. Genetics has turned out to be extremely complex - a foggy crystal ball in which one

cannot discern one's future. Still, there is some usable information to be found in the genome, and more and more of it. For example, we all carry 3 or 4 recessive conditions that we

can pass on to our children. Numerous markers in our DNA can indicate possible health risks. Some people have rare mutations that will almost certainly cause diseases later on in life. Not every genome is as tell-tale as the next.

The human genome can thus be of informative value - it could, for example, be useful for the promotion of health. DNA may also be of informative value for another party, such as an insurance company or an employer, who may refuse to hire somebody on the basis of genetic risks. DNA can be used in immoral ways. These risks

**STILL, THERE IS  
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www.cellout.me screenshot, 151 days left. Photo courtesy of the artist

apply not only to you yourself, but also to your family members. If your genome is analyzed, your siblings may accidentally and perhaps regrettably find out about certain conditions that may also affect them. Your DNA does not belong solely to you. When it comes to decision-making about your genome, your relatives should be involved in the process.

DNA is worthy of protection. This worthiness of protection depends, among other things, on the person. It is said that the security detail of the president of the United States always erases any traces of DNA he leaves behind, wherever he goes. We all lose hairs, skin cells and mucous membrane cells throughout the day. We leave our DNA everywhere we go; on door handles, glasses and acquaintances' hands. Because the traces of DNA we leave behind cannot be read easily, we do not have to protect them on a daily basis. But what about,

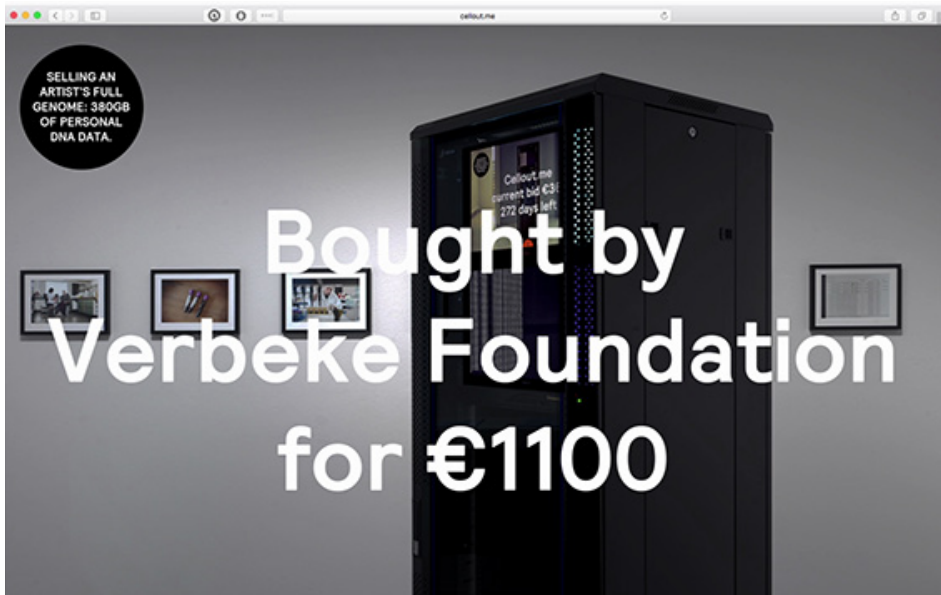
for example, my own genetic test results – including dozens of health risks – that are stored at the commercial American company that has analyzed my DNA for me? The company holds my readable DNA. This is DNA that I should protect. Protecting a genome today mostly consists of monitoring access to the 'read' genome, and ensuring that these three billion pairs of data will not fall into the wrong hands. You can protect a genome by guarding its digital translation, thus protecting the person behind it.

Then there is the symbolic value of DNA. I could keep my baby's first DNA sequence in the same way that I've kept a lock of his hair from his first haircut. The genome as a symbol for a person, then, has value if that person is important to me. There are people who are willing to pay more than half a million dollars for the guitar that John Lennon used in 1966. This guitar is an icon; possessing it brings the owner one step closer to his idol. In

the same way, I could become closer to my loved ones if I possessed their DNA, if I knew their sequence. But what does the complete genome of a 'regular other' mean to me? Every person's DNA is unique. The genome is an identifier in itself; forensic DNA-research requires only about ten genetic markers to create a unique, identifying DNA-profile. A genome is more a person's 'own' than, for example, their name. It contains all the instructions for the construction and the functioning of the body. In the same way that a fully-grown tree is determined by its seed, a fully-grown body is determined by its DNA. In theory, scientists should be able to generate a new human body from one single cell, on the basis of one DNA-molecule: a clone. My genome, that endless chain of A's, T's, C's and G's: that is me.

DNA, in sum, has moral value. It is a carrier of information that can help promote health, but it can also lead





www.cellout.me screenshot, taken on 28-09-2016. Photo courtesy of the artist

to genetic discrimination. DNA is worthy of protection, and it is a symbol for the human being. But how does one express the moral value of DNA? Can it be converted to a monetary unit? Could we possibly conceive of something like a moral selling price in relation to the cost price? You could think of DNA as a digital version of a person. If you guard his genome and keep it, you can save him from obscurity, and maybe, one day, bring him back to life again. How much is mankind worth to me? How much is it worth to you? DNA is mysterious and ordinary, unknown and familiar at the same time. But above all, the value of the genome is personal.

### Economics

*A perspective on Cellout.me by Sander Klous, managing director KPMG Big Data Analytics and Nart Wielaard, writer/advisor.*

The question: “What is Jeroen’s DNA profile worth?”

The simple answer: right now, 0 euros.

Jeroen’s DNA profile has no monetary

value at this moment. It will only be valuable if Jeroen finds a way to get another 100,000 people – or preferably, even more – to offer their DNA profiles for sale. Commercially speaking, you can’t really do anything with the data that a single DNA profile provides. However, this changes if you know how that DNA profile differs from the average profile. If you have this knowledge, you can, for example, find out what type of DNA profile is especially suitable for the highest level of endurance sports, or what type of profile has an increased risk of a certain disease.

However, at this moment, in the collecting phase, we don’t know if Jeroen’s DNA contains any relevant deviations. Let’s assume that Jeroen indeed finds a way to bring together a collective of people willing to sell their DNA profiles. Commercial parties will come forward to exploit the information gathered from these profiles. In this phase, each DNA profile will have the same value, because the buyer does not know which profiles deviate from the norm, and are therefore potentially useful for exploitation. The buyer doesn’t really know what he is purchasing.

This changes (radically) as the buyer builds up a larger database, and if individuals know or suspect that their DNA contains a certain deviation. Take, for example, the extremely talented sprinter Dafne Schippers. The DNA of the fastest woman in the world may provide insights into how this natural predisposition for speed and focus might be determined. If we have this information, we can perhaps already identify the next Dafne Schippers. And what about cancer patients? Insight into the deviations in their DNA could make it possible for us to detect cancer early on in people with similar profiles. The profiles that have no deviations are practically worthless in this phase: these exist in abundance. And scarce goods are often more expensive, regardless of whether these deviations are positive or negative. It is simply a matter of market forces.

In the case of deviations in our DNA, we can take this one step further. Scarce goods are usually more expensive, but that is only valid to a certain extent in this case. Say that, on the basis of DNA analysis, we are able to detect early-stage cancer in 10,000 patients. This is valuable, because it enables us to save 10,000 lives. But if the deviation is so specific that we can only detect it in 15 patients, it suddenly becomes much less interesting; only a very small group of people benefit from this discovery. Both supply and demand, then, are determined by the scarcity of the deviation, and if the demand is too low, the market value is not worth the investment.

The value of your DNA, then, depends on the following question: do you know how much your DNA deviates from the average profile? Profiles without any important deviations as well as profiles with very unique deviations are likely to be worth less.

Should we ever get to a phase where we are able to manipulate DNA and its associated personality traits (a phase where this is ethically acceptable), these unique deviations logically will become more interesting.

## Cybersecurity

A perspective on Cellout.me by cyber crime expert Pim Volkers, executive vice president of Fox-IT and co-founder of Verilabs.

Like many other innovations, the ever-growing possibilities in the area of DNA analysis bring about problems. Within the cyber domain, these problems may include artificial intelligence, cyber crime or maybe even terrorism. The similarities between our profession and Genetics lie in the use of computing forces, the recognition of patterns and the protection of data.

If DNA is the new gold, I expect to see a gold rush, like we have seen before in the US and South Africa. The suspected treasures hidden beneath the surface of DNA sequences are so appealing that they will attract all kinds of researchers and entrepreneurs. The first to show up will be the prospectors – the specialists who explore the area of the continuously growing amount of DNA data. Due to the annually increasing capacity of the DNA sequencers, the price of the mapping of the area will go down drastically. There are projects, like in the UK, that aim at sequencing the complete genome of 100,000 people. Though this is revolutionary, and vital if a gold rush is to be triggered, this is only the first step. The area has been localized, but the gold is still hiding in the huge mountain of DNA data. Now, the first, still well organized explorations

will take place. The project in the UK is well protected, and it has a clear aim: tracking down the causes of rare hereditary disorders. The access to the goldmine is explicitly controlled.

But in the background, the next group of gold miners is lurking. These miners are less interested in the jackpot (unravelling the genetic background of hereditary diseases), but are aiming for the smaller treasures in the DNA instead. They will focus on collecting the DNA data of as many individuals as possible, and making this data searchable. They will also look for the smaller veins of gold within the big data of our DNA. And that is when we will find out what the true value of the ground in which they are searching, our DNA, really is.

If this value is not clear at when we sell (or hand over) our DNA, we could end up like the farmer who sells his grounds for a small profit, and is then forced to watch as the gold is mined from those grounds.

Why is Google interested in DNA profiles? What can we gather from these profiles, now and in the future?

Would you want to (publicly) know the sequences of dangerous viruses – could they be spread by a drone, flying over Dam square on Commemoration Day? What about your privacy with regard to health insurance companies? Would you even want to know where the weaknesses and strengths in your DNA lie? In short, handing over this information without ensuring the protection of your data will always be a problem deserving of a critical approach.

So what is the best way to protect your data? In any case, make sure it is well encrypted. You should also make sure that your passwords are strong. If you rely on a third party to manage the protection of your data, ask them to clarify things. Make sure you are up to date about their protection policy, and, most importantly, stay critical.

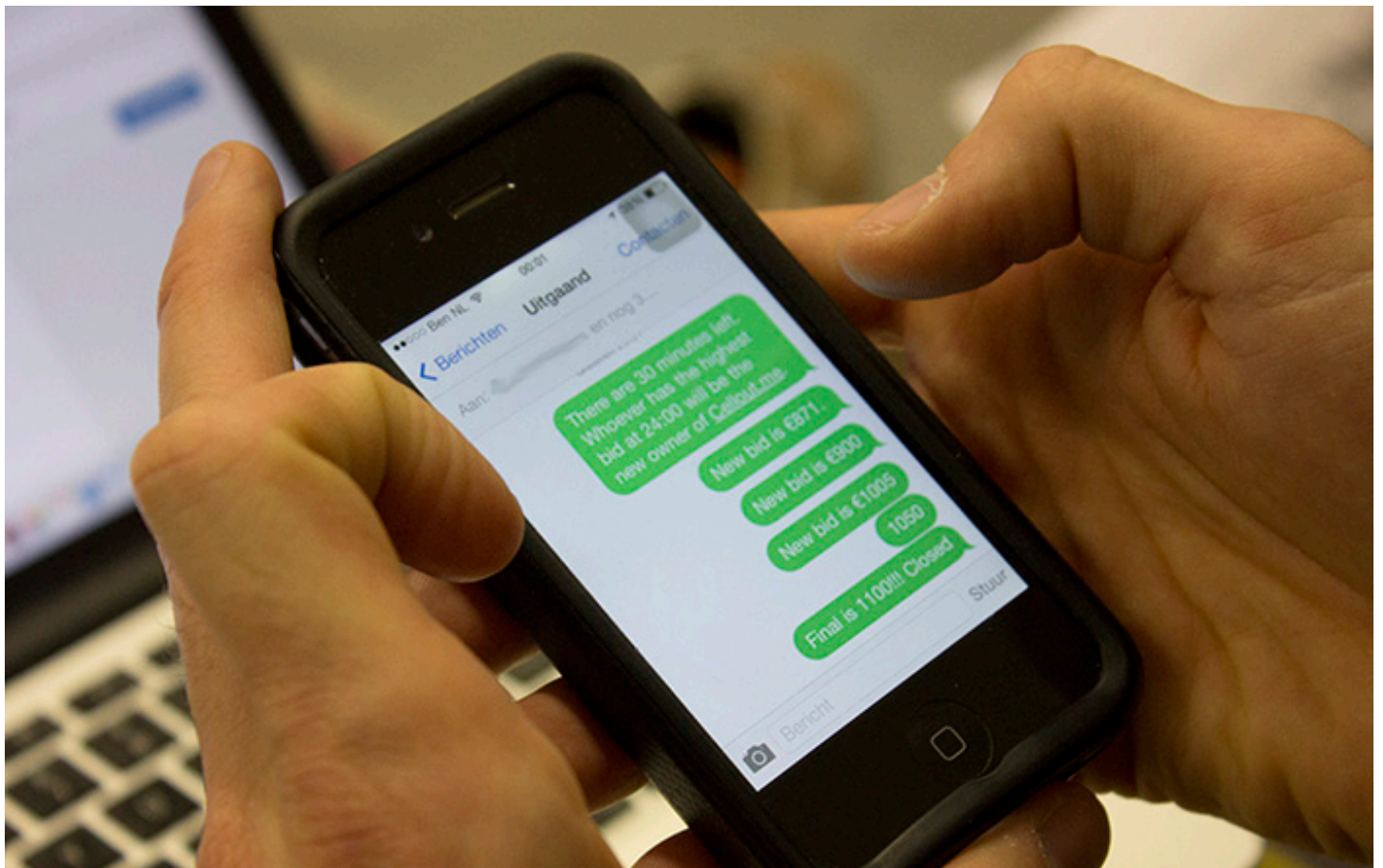
## Final thoughts

The first thing everyone asks me when I talk about cellout.me is “Are you happy with the €1100 you got for it?” My answer has always been “That’s not for me to say, since it doesn’t matter what I think or feel about the money. The goal was to sell human DNA data; whether it was sold for €1 or €1,000,000 doesn’t matter. The process itself is more important than the money.”

## WHY IS GOOGLE INTERESTED IN DNA PROFILES? WHAT CAN WE GATHER FROM THESE PROFILES, NOW AND IN THE FUTURE

But if I’m being completely honest, I didn’t feel that strongly about the artwork for the entire year. During the last month of the auction, and especially during the final days, I became more and more nervous. The general feeling was one of doubt, failure and excitement. There was this almost subconscious feeling of personal failure. “What if I don’t get enough money for it?”, “What do people think of the work?”, “Is it still a successful work?”. I’m selling my DNA data, this has never been done before, there’s nothing to compare it to. The fact that I felt that the work would be a failure if the price tag wasn’t big enough is strange; apparently I equated successful artwork with expensive artwork. It’s interesting to reflect on this. Does





Final moment of cellout.me auction. Photo courtesy of the artist

it have to do with a final moment of insecurity? Or with my ego? Am I a better person when my DNA data is more expensive? Maybe it's capitalism in its most fundamental form, putting a price tag on the information of a human being. Either way, after working on the artwork for more than a year, in the end I still became obsessed with, or fearful of, the financial end result. The interesting thing was that I wasn't the only one thinking about this. I remember being asked to appear on national tv in the Netherlands, but eventually the producer told me to let them know when the price tag 'gets bigger and interesting enough for television'. The same went for people from the artistic community; more than once, I was advised to artificially raise the price by placing fake bids myself. One person even advised me to hire a SEO specialist to make sure that [www.cellout.me](http://www.cellout.me) would be the first hit and told me "It should be your number one priority to push up the price as much as possible, otherwise the whole thing will be a failure", claiming that a human genome should be worth as much as possible. Throughout the year-long auction, I always defended the artwork, saying that the price tag didn't matter, that the value of my DNA data might even end up being lower than the actual production price. That's an idea that I still find very interesting, and that turned out to be true in my case. At the end, I became just like every other person, fearing a 'low' price. Today the whole discussion of the price tag is

non-existent in my mind. The work has been sold; there is a price tag for human DNA data now. We can work from there. We could ask: when will the price of a human DNA profile differ? I don't believe the price will be any different purely based on the actual differences in DNA profiles. I think the price will change based on its 'biological representation device', in other words, on the person who is represented by the DNA data. This means that, as is the case with all art, the value of a human DNA profile resides in context rather than production

■ JEROEN VAN LOON

## JEROEN VAN LOON

Jeroen van Loon lives and works in Utrecht, Netherlands. He received a bachelor in Digital Media Design and a European Media Master of Arts from the HKU University of the Arts Utrecht. His fascination revolves around the revealing, documenting, and visualizing of digital culture. Earlier work focussed on its personal and societal impact while recent work focusses on the Internet itself: its architecture, physicality, and connectivity—speculating on how these will change in the future. Van Loon gave two TEDx talks, won the European Youth Award and was awarded the K. F. Hein Art Grant. Recent work is included in the collection of the Verbeke Foundation, Belgium. <https://jeroenvanloon.com/>





Iphone used as a literal and symbolic mirror of its user

# PUTTING THE SELF IN SELFIE: AN EXPLORATION INTO THE WAYS IN WHICH DIGITAL DEVICES ACT AS AN EXTENSION OF THE SELF

by Samaa Ahmed

## Extended Self

In the 21st century, most aspects of our daily routine are mediated through digital devices. Due to the ubiquity of technology - whether at work, school, or play - our electronic possessions are an integral part of our lives. Campbell (2005) describes the shift in the utility of our devices

“from technological tools, to social tools.” I would take that idea a step further, to say that our devices are identity-building tools. Personally, my iPhone acts as a tool for communication, organization, documentation, and sometimes, as a form of escapism or to alleviate boredom. I have a very intimate relationship with my phone, as it is always on my body - in my pocket, in my hands - or



within my arm's reaching distance. In the moments when I misplace my phone, I feel panicked. The reason for this is the significance of what my phone represents. My smartphone is the primary way that I stay in touch with others, and as a result, it often acts as the embodiment of people I care about. Whether it is a birth announcement and a photo of my baby niece, an excited phone call informing me of my friend's engagement, or an email congratulating me on receiving a scholarship that I worked very hard for, my phone is the medium through which all of these messages are delivered.

I became interested in the way that my own identity has been shaped by my relationships with digital devices shortly after my grandmother passed away in 2013. I was notified in a family groupchat, and almost immediately my cousins and aunts shared photographs and videos of her, and wrote sentimental texts about how much she meant to all of us. My grandmother was in Pakistan, and I was living in the U.S. at the time. I had just gotten my first job, and I was not able to take time off to go to her funeral. I mourned through my phone, making it a shrine to her memory. I grieved by posting photos that I had with her on my Instagram feed. I changed my homescreen and wallpaper to a selfie of us together. I listened to recordings of her voice, and watched YouTube videos of her favorite songs.

In the process of memorializing my grandmother, it occurred to me that this was perhaps the first time in history that all of these different psychological, interpersonal, and material functions could be carried out on one device. Not even twenty years ago, I would have probably received a

phone call on my landline to hear the news of my grandmother's passing, I would have to rifle through a tangible photo album to see her face, I would put a tape into a VCR to watch family movies of us, I would listen to songs that reminded me of her on a CD, and I would possibly put a photo of her in my wallet to keep her close to me at all times.

Now, I was able to seamlessly integrate all of these activities into my everyday life, facilitated by my iPhone. On the one hand, this could simply be explained by advancements in technology. But on the other hand, and the direction that I tend to favor, this was a result of my extreme identification with my phone. By bestowing a part of my emotional self onto it, my phone was able to carry out these deeply personal functions for me.

My relationship with my phone is not unique, nor am I alone in the way that I have begun to see my phone as an extension of myself. In 1988, Belk conducted several studies that examined consumer behavior and the meanings that consumers attach to their possessions. Through his findings, he was able to explain the phenomenon, which he referred to as the extended self, quite succinctly: that "we are what we have" (p 160).

When analyzing the significance of people's most precious and useful possessions (at the time, cars for men, and jewelry for women), he found "possessions follow body parts and mind in their centrality to self" (p 159). At first, while reading that claim, I found

it to be hyperbolic. However, upon deeper consideration, I can relate to the idea of feeling lost, alone, and vulnerable without my most important possessions. I do impart a lot of symbolic value to my favorite possessions, and they offer me a sense of validation in return.

In our digital world, we have different and increasingly complicated ways of extending ourselves, beyond our tangible possessions. Belk updated his theory in 2013, by publishing his study "The Extended Self in a Digital World." This newer work provides the context for much of my paper.

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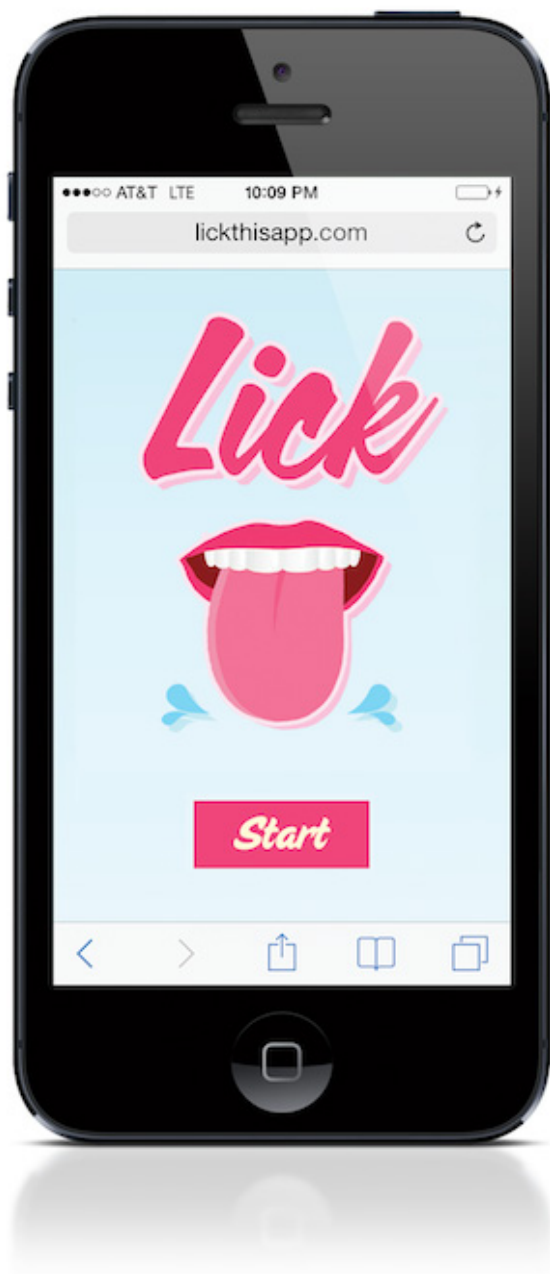
Belk (2013) introduces new factors that are involved in creating the extended self, including dematerialization, re-embodiment, and co-construction of the self. These new concepts take into account the ways in which people's relationships with objects in general have changed from the 1980s to present day. For example, we have fewer objects that do more tasks, and so the scope of "what is mine" (Belk, 1988) is narrower. This has effects on how we prioritize the few objects that we have, and in turn changes the ways that they embody and co-construct our identities.

Recently, I accidentally left my laptop in a rental car, and I felt real, physical pain when I thought that it was lost forever. I cried. Aside from missing personal files and photographs, my heart ached when I considered what a lost laptop would mean for my livelihood as a designer. I thought about the work that I would not be able to deliver to my clients on time, and the



potential contracts that I would lose out on. I thought about the endless hours of sketching, writing, and graphic files that would be lost forever. I worried about the personal information stored on my laptop being stolen or made public.

The reason that this experience was so traumatizing for me is that, essentially, my office was destroyed. As a freelancer, the laptop represented all of my current work, my past portfolio, and contained all of my confidential HR files. When framed in that way, my strong response seems more justified. In a normal corporate setting, a destroyed office would be a catastrophic situation. It would be an issue taken very seriously, and many people's lives would be affected. However, because of the nature of creative work, and the remoteness of teleworking, this situation - whose impact would normally be shared by an entire department - fell solely on me. Belk (2013) describes this phenomenon as the process of "privatization" of the self through technology.



iPhone used as a literal and symbolic mirror of its user

Personalized digital devices allow us to be "isolated" from others, because we can complete complex tasks by ourselves, where previously we would have relied on others. Although this can be a liberating experience, it can have some negative consequences too. What I am interested in is the social, cultural, and political consequences to increasingly privatized, isolated, and personal relationships with technology, not necessarily with placing a value judgment on whether they are good or bad.

### Embodiment and Virtuality

Our relationships with our possessions, and our technologies, are not all equal. Ahuvia (2005) argues that the possessions that have the most symbolic significance, thus the ones that we identify with most, are objects that we "love". He describes "love objects" as those possessions that give us enjoyment, arouse our passions, and appeal to our aesthetic, ethical, and practical senses. Using this definition in my own life, I would categorize my iPhone as a "love object".

In an informal survey of my friends and classmates, they also deem their smartphones as love objects. When I asked my friends and classmates to elaborate why, they explained that their phones carry their most important and intimate information, and that they spend hours interacting with and through it everyday. When prodded a bit further, they proudly showed off the ways in which they have customized their phones, either on the outside with decorative cases and trinkets, or by downloading apps, creating shortcuts, or modifying software. This anecdotal evidence is supported by Srivastava (2005) who says, "the mobile phone has indeed become





Steve Jobs iPhone 3G Presentation

the most intimate of a user's personal sphere of objects" and that "users have a more 'emotional' relationship with their phones than with any other form of communication technology" (p 113).

These claims are further explored by Farman (2012), who analyzes the codependent relationship that consumers have with their mobile phones. He posits that when we use mobile technologies, "we engage in the process of enacting embodiment across media interfaces" (p 21). This embodiment most often takes shape as a textual persona, a user profile on an app, or an avatar, among other forms. Farman suggests that this "sensory-inscribed body... becomes a lens for all of our interactions with mobile interfaces." What I understand this to mean is that embodiment is not dependent on physical space, and that technology becomes embodied through our interactions within and between digital media. Farman also argues that the interfaces of mobile phones are intentionally designed in order to blur the boundaries between what is "real" and "virtual" life. A very interesting example of where this embodiment

happens quite seamlessly is in intimate relationships. Stone (1991) studied phone sex workers, and she argued that the entire project of phone sex was contingent upon the phone, and conversation through the phone, being considered an adequate or satisfying substitute for physical intimacy. She explained, "what was being sent back and forth over the wires wasn't just information, it was bodies." This was in the pre-cell phone era, where conversations were only verbal, and the length of the phone call would be limited to how much time one could spend monopolizing the family land-line. But in our modern age, these sexual "virtual" relationships can also include images and video, and can be carried on all day, in our pockets and away from prying eyes.

Many people fall in love online (with a real person or with a "catfish"), or arrange hook ups through apps, and many more maintain long distance relationships through their smartphones. Our phones must become an extension of our physical, and potentially emotional, selves in order for these interactions to be meaningful. With advancements in technology,

the kinds of interactions that can be experienced through phones are becoming more sophisticated.

We share very intimate moments with others, through our phone, and therefore the phone becomes part of the intimacy (Ahmed & Lawrence, 2016). In fact, we even have apps like lickthis-app.com, which invites users to simulate oral sex (on a clitoris) using their tongues on the surface of their phones. Another example is the app Couple, which helps long-distance partners stay in touch. Their "Thumbkiss" feature simulates the tactile experience of intimacy, with one's phone acting as a proxy for one's partner. When both people touch the same spot on their screens, their phones vibrate, and they both experience physical feedback.

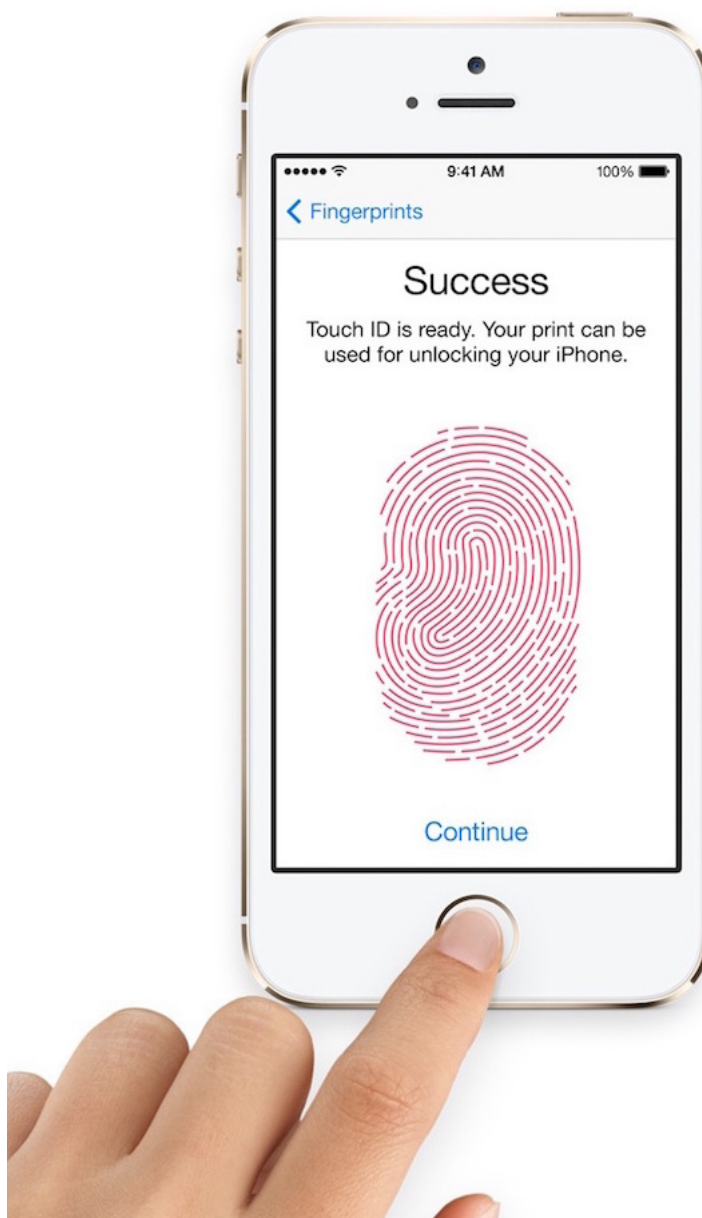
Is the intimacy experienced through these digital spaces not "real"? Farman says, "the virtual is not the opposite of the real, instead it is a component of experiencing the real" (p 22). Firstly, most of the interactions that happen in virtual space began as interactions in material space, and secondly, what happens in virtual space does affect our "real" lives. We experience genuine emotion – unfiltered happiness and sadness – depending on what we read online, or the way that someone treats us on social media. We have conversations on messenger apps that we pick up again in person. We follow directions on our phone GPS to take us to real places.

So, what is unreal about the digital? Through all of these interactions, we are able to effortlessly deconstruct the mobile interface. It does not act as an artificial barrier that separates the virtual from the real; instead, it becomes a part of the way that we experience the world.

It is interesting to think about the ways that technology is not only something that we function through, but that is embedded within us. Haraway (1991) proposes a “cyborg” consciousness, whereby she argues that humans are, and always have been, integrated with technology. This idea is similar to Leach (2006)’s argument for mimesis, whereby we create technology in our image, and that we live our lives through technology.

Technology alters our behavior in a multitude of ways: from maneuvering the physical object itself, systematically navigating through interfaces, to selecting the information that we upload on the platforms that we use. Thus, if we shape technology, and technology shapes us in return, it would follow that technology plays a role in how we, as individuals, construct our identity and the way that we think about our “self”.

Technology has an agenda. Apple Inc. actively promotes the ideology of individualism and non-conformity through its products, most notably since its infamous 1984 Super Bowl commercial (Scott, 1984; Zeller, 2011). In 1998, when the first iMac was launched, Steve Jobs explained that the “i” meant “Internet, individual, instruct, inform, inspire” (Griffin, 2016). The company would go on to brand almost all of its products with the prefix “i”, including, perhaps most prominently, the iPhone. It is an interesting naming phenomenon, and has effects on its users, for example I always refer to my phone as “my iPhone.” I cannot think of any other brand that demands its user refer to its products so specifically. I do not call my projector “my Insignia” or my headphones “my JVCs”.



User interface to set up TouchID finger print recognition on iPhone

Arguably the “i” in iPhone is a marker of identity (Elgan, 2013); it not only stands for Jobs’ five initial i-words, but for the possessive I, me, mine. Apple Macintosh computers were the first to create user profiles, which would allow individuals to sign in to a “personalized” homescreen on a shared desktop. It is second nature for me to see my devices named “Samaa’s iPad” or “Samaa’s iPhone”, and if I leave my laptop unattended, my screensaver will let others know that it is “Samaa Ahmed’s Macbook”. What is a more literal example of endowing your identity to an object, than to name

the object after yourself? Since the iPhone was released, it was seen as an “object of desire”, rather than simply a practical device, and it rapidly became a cultural phenomenon. iPhones appealed to a large cross-section of people, from techies to celebrities, and everyone in between (Carrington, 2012). They were able to offer a winning combination of efficiency, functionality, and style. Their sleek form of plastic, metal, and glass represented a highly coveted contemporary aesthetic in design and technology, which allowed users to feel “smart and attractive” while using their phones

(Griffin, 2016). Grossman (2007) explains, “When Apple made the iPhone, it didn’t throw together some cheap-o bare-bones firmware. It took OS X, its full-featured desktop operating system, and somehow squished it down to fit inside the iPhone’s elegant glass-and-stainless-steel case. That makes the iPhone more than just a gadget. It’s a genuine handheld, walk-around computer, the first device that really deserves the name.”

The interface and material qualities of iPhones are designed so that the user can form a very personal and intimate relationship with the object. Most notably, the shiny glass iPhone screen is essentially a mirror. It is a subtle, but intentional design decision that allows users to see their literal reflection in the screen of their phone. Similarly, the size of the object is “not insignificant”, as Carrington (2012) explains, “small screens impact on what can be viewed via the device; the small touchscreen keyboard potentially shapes what can be keyed in... however the small screen size is balanced by extremely high resolution and the uncluttered nature of the interface design” (p 30). The screen size was designed for minimal information to be displayed, but for optimal media viewing. Additionally, the iPhone battery life lasts approximately 12-15 hours before needing to be recharged. This prompts users to charge it every night when they go to sleep, and to start using their phone as soon as they wake up in the morning. Because the iPhone keeps the same schedule as its users, it is able to function as a daily companion.

While Apple did not invent the touchscreen, they arguably “reinvented” it. Since its launch in 2007, the iPhone has become a “dominant design”,

which means that it has influenced the design direction of the entire smartphone market. The major non-Apple smartphones have evolved to resemble the physical appearance and mimic the performance of the iPhone (Carrington, 2012).

The iPhone touchscreen interface has also created new rituals of behavior that impact the way that we interact with our devices. Touching our screens is performative: we know that we must touch with the tips of our fingers, we know that we must touch with a certain optimum level of pressure, and we know that different gestures produce different responses. We know what will happen when we touch each of our apps, we expect that each screen should change almost instantaneously, and any deviation from this script feels jarring. Thus, our touch is an aspect of our reliance, and we create a co-dependent, almost human, relationship with our technology. Our identities do become connected to our phones, for example, through fingerprint recognition, whereby our phone will only unlock if it detects our touch. This is a very deliberate design decision that reinforces the intimacy between object and user.

### Cross Cultural Perspectives

Farman (2012) posits, “technology is not culturally situated, but it is a force driving culture,” (p 24). Undoubtedly, the widespread use of digital devices has affected and shaped our modern culture. Specifically, mobile technology has personalized communication in an unprecedented way, whereby our mobile phones “refer exclusively to an individual” (Geser, 2003). However, the majority of research that looks at the social impact of mo-

bile devices only focuses on Western cultures, so this only gives a limited, ethnocentric perspective. This means that even people all over the world use the same devices, the way that they are used can differ depending on the context. Thus, to get a more holistic picture of the social impact of technology, it is important to look at the ways that smartphones have shaped experiences across cultures.

García-Montes et al. (2006) conducted their research in collectivist cultures, and investigated changes in the self that result from the use of mobile phones. They found that in Spain “the mobile phone promotes the development of an individual uncoupled from traditional institutional forms” (p 78) and that “the mobile phone considerably increases the degree of uncertainty of any appointment or arrangement” (p 75). While this may not sound problematic in an individualistic culture, this can have negative consequences in communities that value connectivity. A lax approach to punctuality and reliability can be seen as disrespectful. Another consequence of the mobile phone in Spain was that “the frontiers between the public and private self became blurred and less solid” (p 72). Thus, in some contexts, the mobile phone could be perceived as a disruptive technology, rather than a constructive one.

Pertierra (2005) looks at these same dynamics within Philippine society. He points out that there is a large global divide between those who have access to modern technology, and those who do not. He refers to this as the “digital divide”, which he argues is being exacerbated by mobile technology. I would agree with his statement in that those who are not connected to the digital world are excluded from







A family takes a selfie in Makati, Philippines. TIME Magazine's top rated "Selfiest City in the World"

some major aspects of contemporary life. Oftentimes, those who are excluded live in the Global South, are poor, are female, and are illiterate. What are the consequences of being excluded when the digital world gets more diverse, interconnected, and inextricably linked from the physical world?

The Philippines has a culture where household members generally share resources, but Pertierra (2005) found that over 75% of mobile phone users report exclusive use and ownership of their phone, and respondents indicated that they value the privacy afforded by their mobile phone (p 43). This is an interesting phenomenon, and Pertierra (2005) argues that "the rate of exclusive and personal use of mobile phones indicates that new patterns of individualism may be emerging" (p 30) in an otherwise collectivist society. What are the long-term effects of this?

As an anecdotal experience, I have noticed that most people in Pakistan – even in rural areas – own or have access to a mobile phone. Mobile technology is an affordable way for people who live in remote and underdeveloped areas to stay connected to their loved ones, even if electricity is sparse. Most mobile phones can connect to the Internet, and data coverage is more prevalent, cheaper, and faster in Pakistan than it is in Canada. However, most smartphone interfaces and keyboards are still designed for communication in English, whereas most Pakistanis do not speak, read, or write in English. Some smartphones have an Urdu option as well, but Urdu is mostly used in large, cosmopolitan cities, not smaller cities or towns where people speak regional or provincial languages. What does this mean for a society that has just over 50% literacy rate (PBS, 2009)? How does this affect people's ability to communicate in their regional languages and dialects?

What are the generational effects of this?

However, mobile phones also can be seen as liberating technologies. Per-tierra (2005) found that "Texting allows Filipinos to express themselves in new ways. They text what they would not normally say in a face-to-face encounter. This has led to new ways of relating with others as well as opened areas of inner-subjective reflection. New and radical identities become possible" (p 27). In other cross cultural studies in Japan, Afghanistan, and England, users have described the increased level of safety that their mobile phone affords them as "empowering" (García-Montes et al., 2006; Campbell, 2008; Srivastava, 2005). Additionally, mobile technology has also become a way for people to save, spend, and transfer money, for example using M-PESA, which has been lauded for "giving millions of people access to the formal finan-

cial system and for reducing crime in otherwise largely cash-based societies” (William & Tavneet, 2010).

## Mobile Futures

To look back at the original question of how digital devices extend the self, it is necessary to ask, what is the self? We can think of the self as an abstract combination of our body and mind, situated within a social context, and can investigate whether our devices extend these aspects of our lives.

In a very literal sense, one’s phone can be seen as a prosthetic, which Brey (2000) argues, “extends the function of the individual organism... and acts as an extensions of the ‘social organism’ as well, that is, extensions of social groups or societies,” (p 13). In essence, we have shifted much of our functionality to our most important digital devices, particularly our smartphones. Our phones carry all sorts of important information, from our debit card number, to a digital copy of our boarding pass. If my phone can act as a proxy for my bank account details and my identification card, how can it not be a material part of myself?

Research that shows that mobile technology has influenced, and extended, the ways that we view our own bodies. For example, we have an increased interest in self-tracking, and have created new habits around monitoring our behavior, that are facilitated by technology. Wolf (2010) calls this the construction of the “quantified self”, whereby we view our bodies in terms of numbers, inputs and outputs. Arguably, this is a reflection of the zeit-

geist: society’s obsession with fitness, beauty, and health, but perhaps there are deeper consequences for this behavior. Van Den Eede (2014) suggests that “if [smartphones, apps, etc.] enhance our in-born tracking abilities, one can also expect them to numb those very abilities to a certain extent,” (p 167). Whether this is true or not, it is something to consider. What do we lose by outsourcing this process to technology?

Barr, et al. (2015) argues for “smartphone use as an instantiation of the extended mind” (p 473). Because of the wealth of knowledge accessible at our fingertips, we no longer need to remember/memorize as much, nor do we need to look very far for information. Sparrow et al. (2011) explain, “the Internet has become a primary form of external or trans-active memory, where information is stored collectively outside ourselves.” This has changed how we prioritize information, with Sparrow et al. (2011)

finding that “people forget items they think will be available externally and remember items they think will not be available.” These results suggest that human memory is adapting to the process of new computing and mobile technology.

Smartphones obviously extend the social functions of the self. They help us to connect, communicate, and share information with others. Because they are always connected to the Internet, we are constantly reminded of other people through our applications, and as such, phones act as a site of self-expression and behavior regulation. It is too early to tell what the

long-term consequences of increased smartphone use will be, but we can already see that mobile technology has augmented our human experience in unforeseen ways, and has created new and exciting opportunities for innovation, subversion, and creativity.

■ SAMAA AHMED

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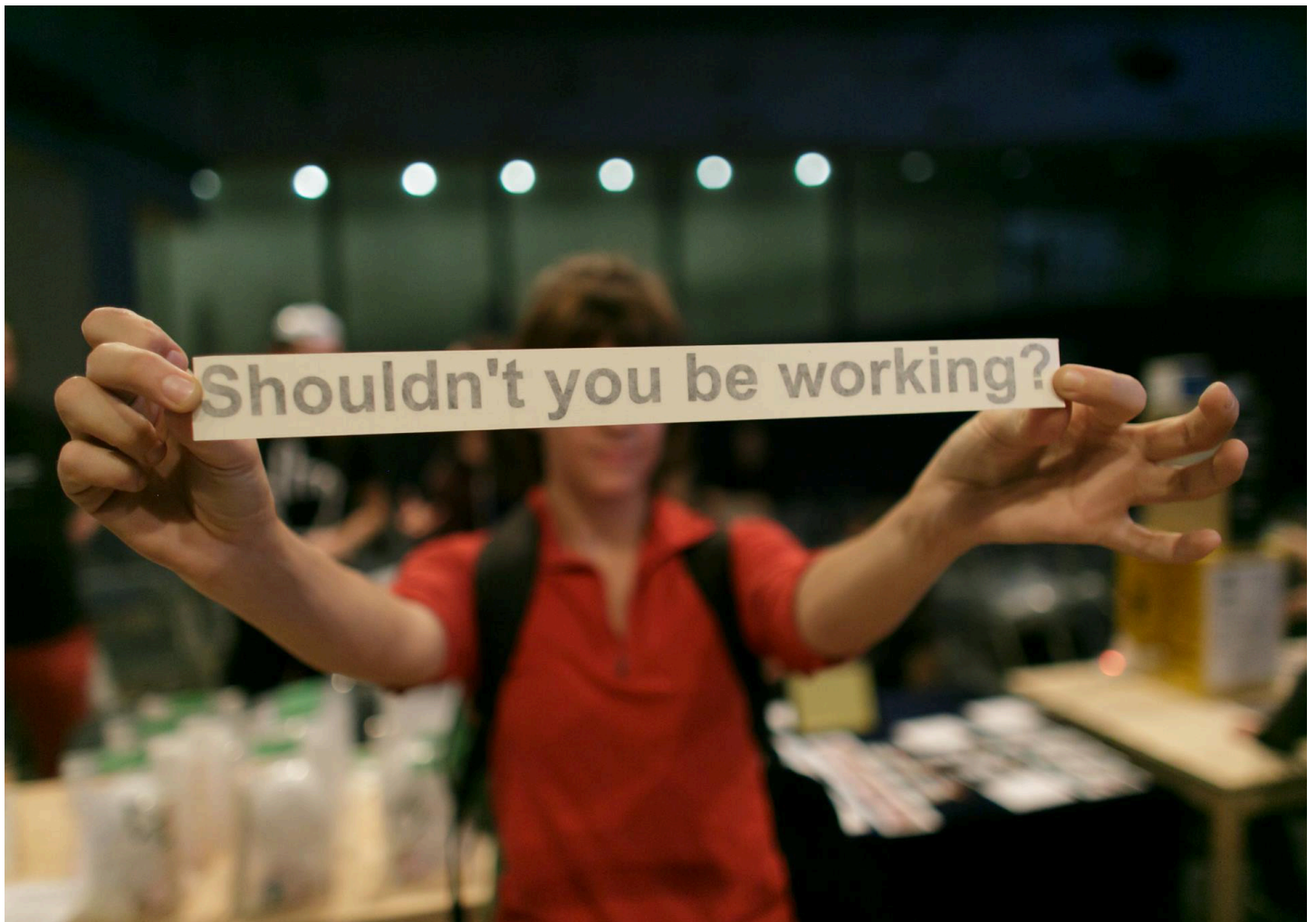
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SAMAA AHMED IS A DIASPORIC PAKISTANI VISUAL ARTIST, DESIGNER, AND WRITER. SHE IS CURRENTLY PURSUING A MASTER'S IN DESIGN IN THE DIGITAL FUTURES PROGRAM AT OCAD UNIVERSITY IN TORONTO, CANADA. SHE IS INTERESTED IN THE INTERSECTIONS BETWEEN GLOBAL CULTURE AND DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES. HER RESEARCH FOCUSES ON EXPLORING INNOVATIVE WAYS TO TACKLE SOCIOPOLITICAL CHALLENGES IN THE DIGITAL AGE, USING AN APPROACH GROUNDED IN CRITICAL THEORY AND DESIGN







Shouldn't you be working?, Silvio Lorusso (2016)

# THE AESTHETICS OF PRODUCTIVE ANXIETY

Silvio Lorusso and the entreprecarariat

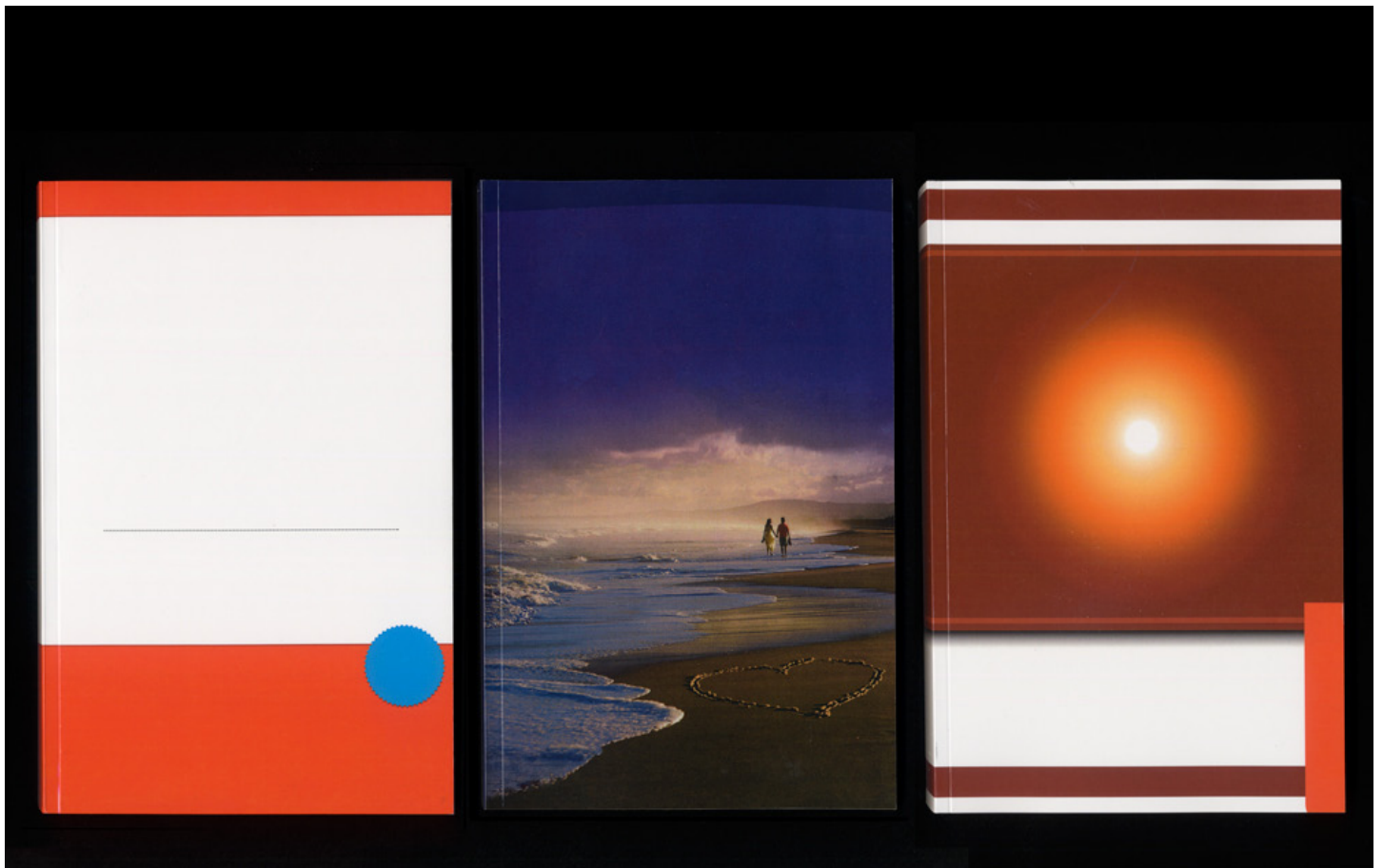
by Nicola Bozzi

## Spinning the Wheel

*The Best Is Yet To Come* (2012) is a webpage with a random sequence of preloader gifs, spinning endlessly and uselessly in time. Apparently busy, de facto idle. According to a study undertaken over a period of two weeks, people spent a grand total of 60 years looking at those buffering icons, waiting and waiting while data was invisibly crunched behind the interface. The piece, by artist, designer and theorist Silvio Lorusso, reminds me of an e-flux essay [<http://www.e-flux.com/architecture/superhumanity/68658/beyond-the-self/>] by Jack Self. According to the author,

real-time systems are revealed to be as ineffective as any decision-making or resource distribution model; they perpetuate the same hegemonic inequalities and commit the same logical errors. The throbber's role is therefore to "mollify" users enough to keep them within the general flow of information "by reframing non-action as a normalized process of data exchange." Thing is, the moment of infrastructural non-productivity captured by Lorusso is perhaps the only escape from another productive loop. Within a digital environment where sociality and work chase each other non-stop, the artist's contemplation of the loading wheel is a much needed break. It is as close to zen as it gets.





Networked Optimization, Silvio Lorusso and Sebastian Schmieg (2013)

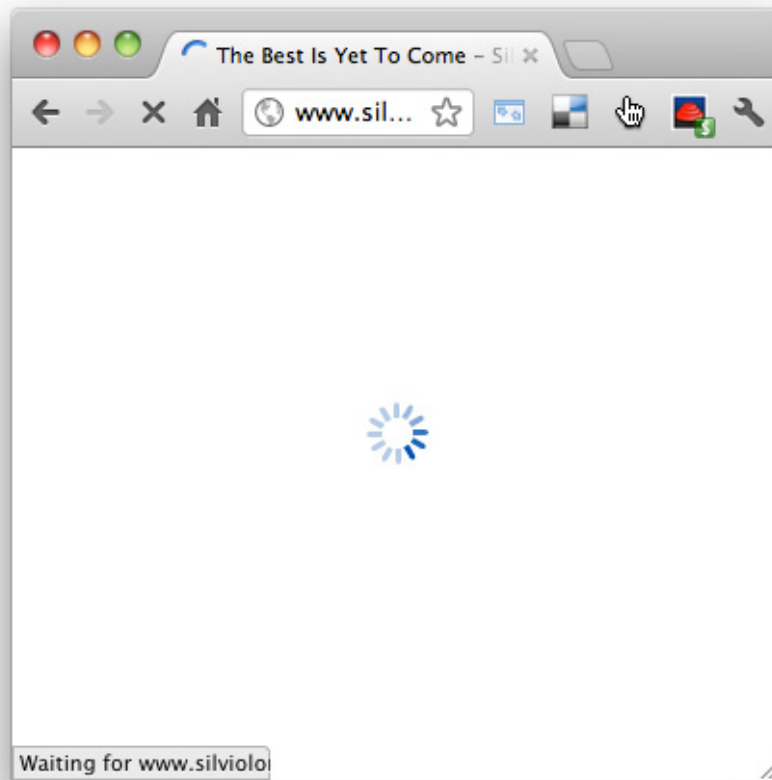
*TBIYTC* is probably the most abstract piece of Lorusso's, but it encapsulates quite well the web-savvy aesthetics of productive anxiety that encompasses his heterogeneous practice. I first became interested in Silvio's work when writing an article about *Networked Optimization*, a series of self-help e-books that he and fellow artist Sebastian Schmieg had hacked so that only the bits most highlighted by other readers would show. The result was a printed series of mostly blank pages, delivering the gist of best-sellers like *How to Win Friends & Influence People* - minus the cumbersome act of actually going through the whole book, courtesy of crowd-sourcing. The work struck me for its technological and aesthetic elegance, but also because it spoke for a lifestyle and a "structure of feeling" (if we are to use Raymond Williams's expression) I am familiar with. The emotional dimension of Lorusso's oeuvre is extremely relatable to someone who, like me and countless others, finds semi-comfortable shelter under the wide umbrella of knowledge work.

Defined in turn as creative or immaterial, knowledge work has been the subject of much theorizing, not insignificantly because it hits close to home for many theorists. One of the last pages of Alan Liu's *The Laws of Cool* (2004), a key text on the topic, reads like an autobiographic confession: "I criticize postindustrialism from the inside because - here

and now, in my place and time - there is no transcendental outside. One must think a little like a corporation to engage with postindustrialism" (Liu, 2004, 387).

A big chunk of Liu's book deals with the peculiarities of knowledge workers as an emerging new class, and their relation to culture. An extrusion of the middle-class (so wide to be deemed "universal", in the words of Gouldner), this new social group does not fit the binary opposition between workers and owners defined by Marxism. In a fuzzier fashion, it identifies with the code of professionalism, but without fully enjoying all its perks. This disillusioned multitude is too deeply embedded within a political cyberlibertarianism to truly be counter-cultural and can only aspire to the detached, tech-aware ethos of "cool". Liu describes it as a "bad attitude" - one that disqualifies its own environment by a lack of faith, rather than participation.

*The Laws of Cool* dedicates many pages to the analysis of management culture and pertaining literature. If the discipline has spilled over into all segments of society and is perceived as a universal cultural model, the new field of "identity management" becomes a sandbox for the simulation of diversity and the cultivation of personality as a professional asset. The removal of history is a crucial step in this direction: flattened within the modular flexibility of



The Best Is Yet To Come, Silvio Lorusso (2012)

the “team” system, all cultural identities are equivalent and replaceable. Going back to the endlessly spinning wheel in Lorusso’s piece, the end of history declared by Francis Fukuyama and repeatedly disputed by, well, history, it’s at least a reality within the hypnotic suspension of a “best” that is, quite surely, not coming.

### The Entreprenariat

The main rationale for Liu’s book is the self-conscious necessity for the humanities to find renewed relevance in society. Creativity is everywhere, yet it is now mandatory for academia and artists alike to justify their work in terms of impact, as well as quantify and map the networking potential of their output. While Liu went to sleep as a cultural critic and woke up as a data processor, the artist today is called to be a data analyst and a neighborhood activist. From Thomas Hirschhorn’s Gramsci Monument in the New York projects to Martha Rosler’s traveling urbanism library, artists have been proving increasingly sensible in terms of their responsibility as urban agents (as well as producing increasingly reading-heavy works). But while the social implications of big data on pre-policing and other social issues have only recently started to be questioned, artist-run spaces in fast-changing LA, no matter how tactful, are sometimes identified as clear harbingers of com-

munity destruction and are being resisted by neighborhood activists. Aesthetic accountability, in this sense, is way ahead of algorithmic accountability.

Towards the end of *The Laws of Cool*, the author outlines ways in which the academic criticality of the humanities can help the viral aesthetics of the really cool - the unbridled, borderline terroristic attitude of new media art - confirm its cultural relevance against the “deep norm of history”. As a necessarily multi-talented artist, working with at least one foot in academia, Lorusso is producing a substantial contribution to contextualize his own work and at the same time push it deeper into critical territory. The Entreprenariat, his research blog hosted at the excellently para-academic Institute of Network Cultures, is thus perhaps his most interesting piece.

As many have tried defining the collective subject both me and Silvio are a part of – from Florida’s overly optimistic Creative Class to Bifo’s historically conscious Cognitariat, via the cultural stereotype of the Hipster – his simple conceptual reworking of “entrepreneur” and “precariat” is particularly fit for the aesthetics of his work, which combines glitch episodes with the self-deprecating irony of memes. The blog outlines an anatomy of the Entreprenariat by analyzing its most widespread phenomena – the distributed



office, for example – and dissecting media objects like memes or ad campaigns.

In one of his blog posts, for example, Silvio addresses a recruiting campaign for Fiverr, a marketplace platform that connects clients and designers offering their services for as little as 5\$. The site profile its potential users like this: “You eat coffee for lunch. You follow through on your follow through. Sleep deprivation is your drug of choice. You might be a doer.” “Doer” is an inherently productive label, almost epically stoic in spinning underpaid efforts and over-working into a nobilitating work ethic, fueled by caffeinated delusions. Reflecting on the self-branding rhetoric of best-sellers like “The Startup of You and The Brand Called You”, as well as the networking platforms sustaining them (e.g. LinkedIn), Lorusso has been particularly effective in encapsulating the anxiety-inducing yet compulsively motivated predicament of the contemporary Foucauldian “enterprise-unit”. With Mark Fisher and Franco “Bifo” Berardi, Silvio argues for a union of the Entreprenariat around common problems such as depression and “feels”, adding a layer of meme-consciousness to it. Since my own research deals with the commodification and circulation of stereotypical cultural identities, I immediately knew I had to talk to Silvio about his project. The quotes in this text were extracted (to use a term familiar to regular readers of immaterial work literature) via the proprietary

infrastructure of Skype.

“Dedicating a year to these themes is scary, because I think it’s risky to brand myself this way,” Silvio tells me. “You know how hip all the talk about automation is, but talking about precarity is not sexy at all. It’s not like 2005, the days of San Precario.” The patron saint of precarious workers, San Precario was an iconic attempt to encapsulate a diffused frustration within a (characteristically Italian) religious imagery. Although the condition of precarity is widespread, it seems the concept has different undertones depending on context. “It’s interesting. I did some research and here in the Netherlands the term precariat is quite academic, unlike in France,” Lorusso explains. “In Italy, which I think is the most interesting case, the term is mostly used

by the media. I always say the problem with the precariat – this kind of semi-middle-class precariat – is it cannot identify with being precarious.” Silvio uses an interesting analogy: “It’s like being outed versus coming out. One would like to come out as precarious, but it’s not a good strategy to do so. On the other hand, you’re constantly outed by the media. It’s used as a weapon against millennials, often linked to the rhetoric of our generation being a bunch of ‘bamboccioni’ (Italian for ‘mama’s boys’).” The goal of the Entreprenariat research blog is thus to develop tools to ease coming out as precarious rather than being outed as such. “The Entreprenariat is my escamotage to do just that, with a degree of irony or dadaism, using something that has yet to be semantized by the media.”

Lorusso decided to focus on the en-

trepreneurial dimension of the precariat after working on the *KickEnded* (2014), a Kickstarter clone featuring only those projects that harvested 0\$, which prompted to ask himself whether he could call himself an entrepreneur. Now, the hope is for the term to be used by other people as well, perhaps competing with other less critical tags for self-branding that are designed by the very corporations that inspire the semi-sustainable lifestyle Silvio is studying.

### The Nomadic Office

(Self)branding as a Doer or a Maker is the result of a continuous practice of imagination, something Lorusso sees as highly strategic. “There is an issue of self-perception. Let’s assume I am forced to work on the move, what kind of representation of myself do I want to give? In terms of personal branding, it makes more sense to portray yourself as an autonomous, independent professional, rather than someone who is working in a crowded café because you don’t have an office to work.” This all-encompassing, aspirational dimension of work links the Entreprenariat to another figure, a dominant one in the current rhetoric of digital work and urban redevelopment: the Digital Nomad. The label seems quite popular: travel blogs, Facebook communities with members in the thousands, online platforms helping users make sure they rent the best desk in the coolest co-working location – the business ecology around the Digital Nomad is big, and growing. Commercial enterprises like travel company Remote Year (around 260,000 likes on Facebook) encourage workers who are already remote, or wish to become so, to apply for a 12-month experience across as many different cities. For a (substantial) monthly price, the com-

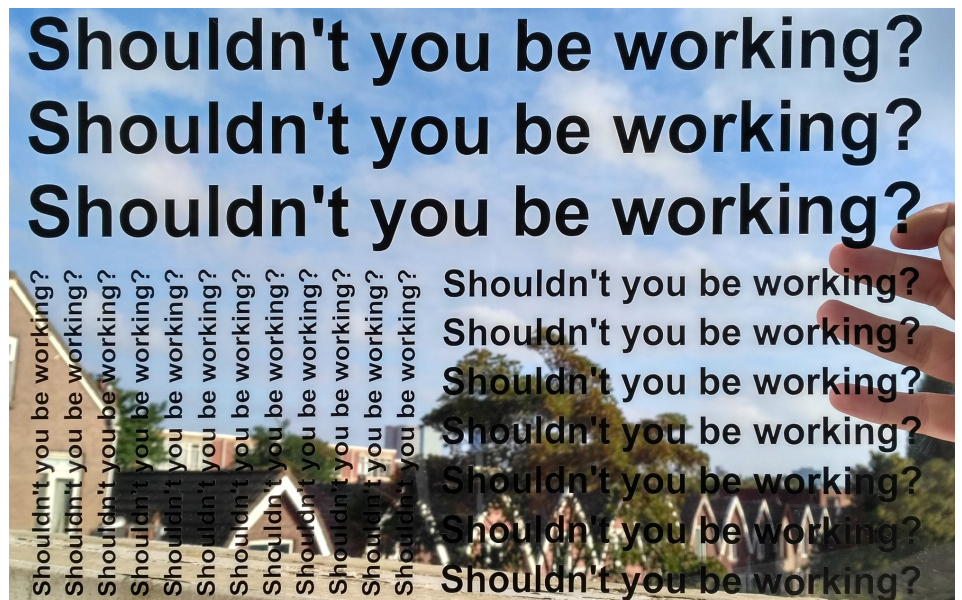
## THE PATRON SAINT OF PRECARIOUS WORKERS, SAN PRECARIO WAS AN ICONIC ATTEMPT TO ENCAPSULATE A DIFFUSED FRUSTRATION WITHIN A RELIGIOUS IMAGERY



pany provides travel and accommodation, as well as a degree of support in helping selected applicants get their employers on board with the remote idea. Most importantly, the selection process provides a level of exclusivity and curation that is itself résumé-worthy – and thus justifies working to pay the fee sustaining your own privileged working condition. The rich and lively network of travel bloggers, posting photos and videos on social media, helps disseminate an inspiring provocation: if we can do it, you can – and, probably, should – do it. If you follow the advice, share and perhaps donate, it's doable – if you don't try, you'll forever wonder what might have been. The Digital Nomad is thus escaping Alvin Toffler's "electronic cottage" to find solace on a similarly wired seaside swimming pool.

Unsurprisingly, Lorusso does not identify as a Digital Nomad. "I feel there is a strong rhetorical push towards the irrelevance of physical space, this idea you can just bring your Mac anywhere, but it's a very elitist vision of what it means to work today," he points out. "Only a small percentage of the so-called creative class can work with just a computer and WiFi. I can work on the train, but I need a recurrent confirmation provided by physical proximity. To get paid, I have to be in the office by contract. Few people can really work independently from a concrete space, and I think it can also be unsustainable on a psycho-physical level."

One of Lorusso's pieces – perhaps the only offline one – ironically addresses the ubiquity of the workplace. Printed on transparent background, in a no-frills, operational typeface, *Shouldn't You Be Working?* (2016) is a series of stickers to be placed in any leisurely or



Shouldn't you be working?, Silvio Lorusso (2016)

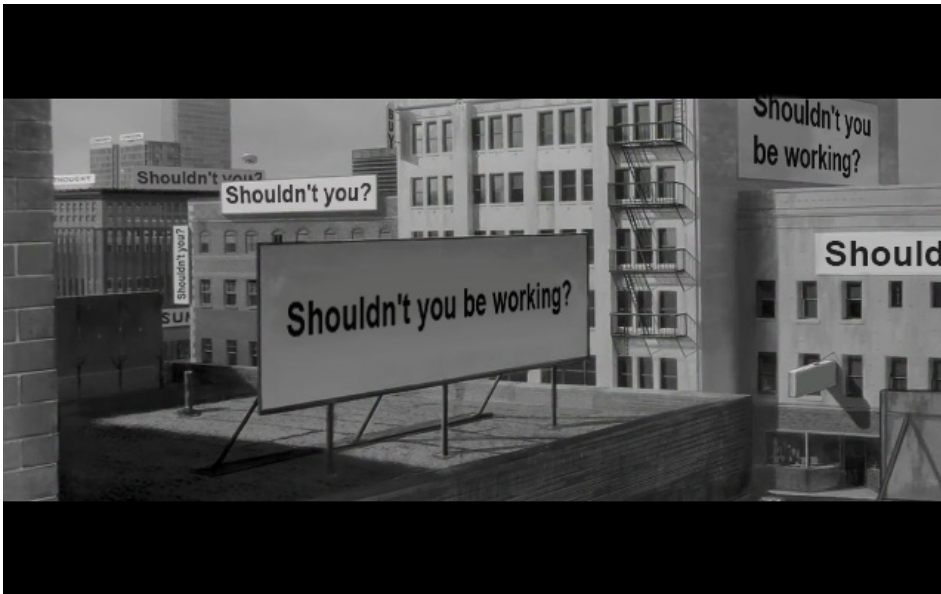
semi-leisurely environment – from a laptop to a toilet – to act as a perpetual memento of the laboral duties ahead. Named after the text that StayFocusd, a browser plugin with more than 600,000 users, prompts when your allotted time on social media and other procrastination-friendly sites is over, *SYBW* allows any surface to remind remote workers that they are still tethered to the machine. Of course, though, the line between sarcasm and practical advice is thin here: will you laugh it off or be triggered back into productive mode?

The idea of the Entreprenariat or the Nomad as a condition, rather than an aspiration, is part of Lorusso's historical perspective as an academic, but it is also part of his personal narrative. "The concept of Entreprenariat has a sort of cognitive dissonance you can find in the Digital Nomad as well," he tells me. "When you come across those articles about working for a Silicon Valley start-up from a café in India, the idea is that this is a personal decision, while necessity is not accounted for. In Italy, for example, if you want to work in the design field you probably need to spend at least

some time in Milan to establish a professional network. There is always an ambivalence between social pressure and personal will."

A WiFi powered working vacation is then still a relatively adventurous endeavor, reserved to an enterprising minority. Most creative workers are still bound to a place where their human connections are physically available – they will enjoy tropical vegetation only on the interior wallpapers of laptop-friendly coffee houses, as they sit by the nearest electric socket in a corner, brushed by the sympathetic caress of a fern.

Kyle Chayka defined the globalized aesthetics of these new spaces of distributed work – the aforementioned coffee houses, co-working and co-living spaces, AirBnBs – as "AirSpace". In a skeptical article on *The Verge*, the journalist describes the sterile, faux-artisanal style of interior design encouraged by Silicon Valley companies, pointing out how this kind of aesthetic gentrification is accompanying actual gentrification. In fact, we might add, this type of copy-paste development that has been putting its mark



Shouldn't you be working?, Silvio Lorusso (2016)

on cities all over the world – driven by “quality” tourism and freelancing – is arguably pushing towards the ultimate post-gentrification stage: short-term communities based on professional affinity and networking potential that establish themselves just as the promise of diverse living environments, once defended by a now shrinking social housing supply, is falling short.

In terms of aesthetics, Silvio has an interesting idea about the office. “I think at the moment there is an emerging nostalgia towards the office. All these hip co-working spaces that are popping up everywhere are obviously a cool, hipster response to a logistical issue. However, the office had a sort of authority to it, against which you could develop some tactics. When you go to Starbucks it’s about you creating your own productive space. The freelancer becomes its own manager and space has a very important role. These spaces have become dystopian, they are full of social propaganda. A co-working space in Amsterdam, for example, is covered with slogans like: “Everybody should like everybody”, which remind me of the dystopian sci-fi novel by Dave Eggers, *The Circle*.

The scary thing is dystopia and reality are not separate anymore, like in the ‘boring dystopia’ idea described by Mark Fisher. A dystopia that doesn’t shock anymore, which might even make you smile.” Funny enough, the same year the AirSpace article came out on the Verge a co-working space by the same name was launched – unironically, I presume – in London.

The idea of the office as a dialectical space that can engender subversion has an accelerationist ring to it, a point of view that Lorusso doesn’t share. But the concept of *Entreprenariat* is contradictory by definition. “Greyness can become a liberation, if opposed to this forced enthusiasm. I think it’s interesting. I see this double, paradoxical process: the city is becoming an office, you look for WiFi and sockets. But the office is becoming a theme park.”

Lorusso’s attitude and nostalgia for an oppressive working environment – the likes of those evoked in the quasi-Kafkaian *Fantozzi*, a cult-series of Italian comedies, or at the very least the Geto Boys-powered nerd rebellion of *Office Space* – is perhaps

just a provocation. However, it is the symptom of a wider cultural awareness, one that Liu doesn’t fail to outline in *The Laws of Cool*. As he argues, the co-optation of subculture by the middle-class transforms what was once the appropriation of technology, aimed to hijack its rationality towards unproductive techniques, into a productive mode of self-branding itself. While inescapably embedded within the system, “cool” workers manage to cope with it by adopting a “bad attitude”. As a “code of awareness”, for Liu “cool” is “too fundamental and inchoate itself to be called an identity,” but it is “nevertheless the formative material of imagined identities promising knowledge workers some hope of alternative lives of knowledge” (Liu, 2004, 184).

It turns out, hope is not so alive and some of those lives are not so alternative: while squatting is increasingly replaced by subsidized guardianship and counter-cultural energies become enmeshed in real-estate cycles, the aesthetics of disillusion coalesce into curious and perhaps worrying forms of subcultural identification.

## Hip to Be Square

Patton Oswalt, an American stand-up comedian who experienced the transformation of San Francisco from a counter-culture capital to a techie paradise first hand, has a bit [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kqxt-aJfH7UA>] that goes: “If I ever have a kid I’m gonna be a fucking amazing father. I’m gonna be the most boring, hateful father on the planet. All my friends who had hippie parents – you know what they did when they got out of high school? Got married, had kids, settled down, moved to the suburbs. And ruined everything.” The



# Halloween Neighborhood Terror

by Tyler Merluzzi

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North Syracuse, NY

**Funding Unsuccessful** This project's funding goal was not reached on October 25.



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On Halloween of this year, my brother and I will wear costumes and go-pros and terrorize the neighborhood while recording our haunting.

The Best Is Yet To Come, Silvio Lorusso (2012)

quote above resonates with a recent Vice article by Max Daly about decreasing drug use among teenagers: an encouraging indicator that nonetheless is apparently linked to increasing pressure on performance, competition and public image. The bit might also give us a clue or two about the genealogy of the person who commented a Mute Magazine article [<http://www.metamute.org/editorial/fifth-column/notes-normcore>] titled "Notes on Normcore" as follows: "Normcore is at its roots conservative, and right now, I am all for it. The time for leather jackets is done. That coincides with being done with wanting universal healthcare. I just want lower taxes, less immigrants, and for

people to do as the police say when arrested. And I guess I want to wear it on my sleeve. Which is funny thinking back. But I don't think you get it either. Its not ironic, not at heart. Its for real. Normcore evens the playing field in many ways, but it isn't easy to pull off unless you have the physical attributes to bring to the table, and it certainly isn't cheap. NorthFace is fairly spend, if you look. Its a bit elitist, even. I guess I am a rebel enough to say I approve. Isn't that funny too? That normcore is one way to shout that people are NOT all the same....or even equal."

Dated 2014, the comment is quite exemplary of the con-

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dition described earlier. Described by trend forecasting group K-Hole in 2013 as an attitude, rather than a particular code or dress, Normcore emerged for a while as a type of aesthetic of the mediocre, a proud celebration of the “nothing special” sometimes identified with the style (and perhaps the attached cynicism) of Seinfeld characters. Clothing-wise, Wikipedia defines it as unisex and consciously undistinguished rather than carelessly unfashionable. As the crowd-sourced encyclopedia reminds us, the fact that the AP Stylebook added the label in 2016 is an indicator that the term is not much in the news but not quite

**SUCH FORMATTING  
OF IMAGINATION  
ALSO REFLECTS  
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COMMUNICATION AND  
SELF-EXPRESSION**

dead either.

In terms of cultural perspective, as the commented article by Benedict Seymour argues, Normcore was a post-hipster aesthetics that, by giving away with subcultural style, fully embraced the technologically-wired, politically disillusioned zeitgeist of the millennial generation.

Seymour writes: “We are in the (post) hipster zone, the magic circle where formerly punk or outsider styles got transvalued is now reserved for the beatification of the mainstream itself.” The author goes on: “Normcore as the simulacrum (from above) of the vanishing middle, the oligarcho-aristo-creative’s objectification of what is objectively vanishing? Normcore as dressing-up-as-shepherds-style pre-revolutionary elite condescension. Or post-Occupy spasm - of shame and appropriation? A fashion derivative, a spread, various forms of insurance at once, a mugging against being mugged, a dressing down in

defensive anticipation of a further attack.”

The 99% movement was arguably Western youth’s most politically-driven attempt at collective subjectivation in a decade devoid of a dominant counter-cultural aesthetic like the ones that marked the previous ones – punk, hippie, early hip-hop, etc. Albeit ultimately failing to conjure up a common political program, the imaginary effort was a noble endeavor to bridge across style and class, reconnecting to a sort of materialism against capitalist speculation.

Politically, then,

Normcore is perhaps the aesthetic reflux of the performativity trap Geert Lovink talks about in *Social Media Abyss* (2016). Far from being an identitarian, the Dutch theorist nonetheless points out the incapacity to build coalitions as a major flaw of the Occupy movement. “When activism promotes itself as a counter-culture,” Lovink argues, “the ability of its memes to travel outside the issue-context becomes limited and starts to run contrary to the 99% slogan” (2016, 186). Lovink’s call to get rid of the “libertarian/liberal hipster image” effectively highlights the aesthetic dimension of activism in the age of social media, often dismissed by terms like “slacktivism” or “clicktivism”.

Liu also acknowledges the political paralysis of the “cool” into a cyber-libertarian pose that puts individual liberties – free speech above all – over social justice. Significantly, cool alternative politics are more comfortable with postindustrialism than NGOs and labor activists are. In fact,

such alternative politics are perhaps best represented in the Alt-Right phenomenon whose popularity exploded before the Trump election in 2016: unsurprisingly, the Alt-Right’s sworn enemies were the quickly acronymized SJW, or Social Justice Warriors, comprising third-wave feminists, intersectional identitarians and PC regulators.

Normcore, then, before the identitarian, neo-fascist simulation of Alt-Right memes, embodies an aesthetic coagulation of the frustrated, cynical spirit of a highly-educated, politically-disillusioned middle class.

**Formatted Identities and Utopian Feelings**

In the dark clarity of Mark Fisher’s *Capitalist Realism* (2009), the psychic effects of capital have become so embedded within us that incorporation has now become “precorporation”: the pre-emptive formatting and shaping of desires, aspirations and hopes by capitalist culture (2009, 9). Such formatting of imagination also reflects pathologically on communication and self-expression, regimenting the very networks one would expect to empower the flourishing of multiplicity.

While Liu recognizes the “oxymoronic, even manic-depressive” emotional state of “cool” (Liu, 2004, 235), according to Vito Campanelli, writing in “Web Aesthetics” (2010), the web is characterized by an autistic mode of expression, constituted by repetitive actions and loss of contact with external reality – a situation he associates to bloggers and reviewers in particular. The Italian scholar also highlights how monolingualism is flattening dialogue into expressive clichés that are always repeated and typify a diffuse aesthetic in which







Shouldn't you be working?, Silvio Lorusso (2016)

contents are reduced to their formal qualities, while “any semantic, moral or ethical properties are left aside” (Campanelli, 2010, 26-28).

Lorusso is aware of the emotional dimension of the Entreprecariat, twisted between a communicational push and an idiosyncratic pull. “There is obviously an emergency, as confirmed by all the efforts from governments like the UK to campaign for wellbeing, also because depression is a logistical problem that affects productivity,” he tells me. “But there is also an unexpressed potential. There are different levels of precarious workers. You need to be careful: I focus on a middle-class or post-middle-class, highly educated Western European workers. You talk about this informally, but professionally you wouldn’t want to brand yourself as such. This psychological dimension that emerged from the 80s, affecting so-called young people, bridges together different social strata

and is an unexplored potential on a political, organizational level. This idea of a collective anxiety, as described in Bifo’s work, might help people unite, a bit like being a factory worker used to unite past generations. This idea of mental health, feelings, could lead to the development of organizational tools.”

Professional, demographic or subcultural labels like Creative Class, Digital Nomad or Normcore put their own spin on the millennial/knowledge worker condition, herding desires and expectations towards competitive self-affirmation or resigned nihilism. Maybe Lorusso’s work on a collective subject to channel a more nuanced emotional cocktail could be an appropriate aesthetic strategy in a utopian direction. Creating such a collective subject could leverage the viral dynamics of contemporary communication, perhaps even the stereotypical approximation of memes, to harvest

(socially) productive feelings.

Liu’s investigation into the laws of cool does highlight “viral aesthetics” as a possible response to infrastructural domination, but while the scholar brought net and media art as exemplary acts of Schumpeterian creative destruction, the times were not urgent enough – namely, 2016 had not happened yet – to talk about a West-wide memetic battle to resuscitate the Left’s imagination and fend off the retrograde energies of the Alt-Right. Perhaps the collective anxiety sweeping the humanities could work as a catalyst.

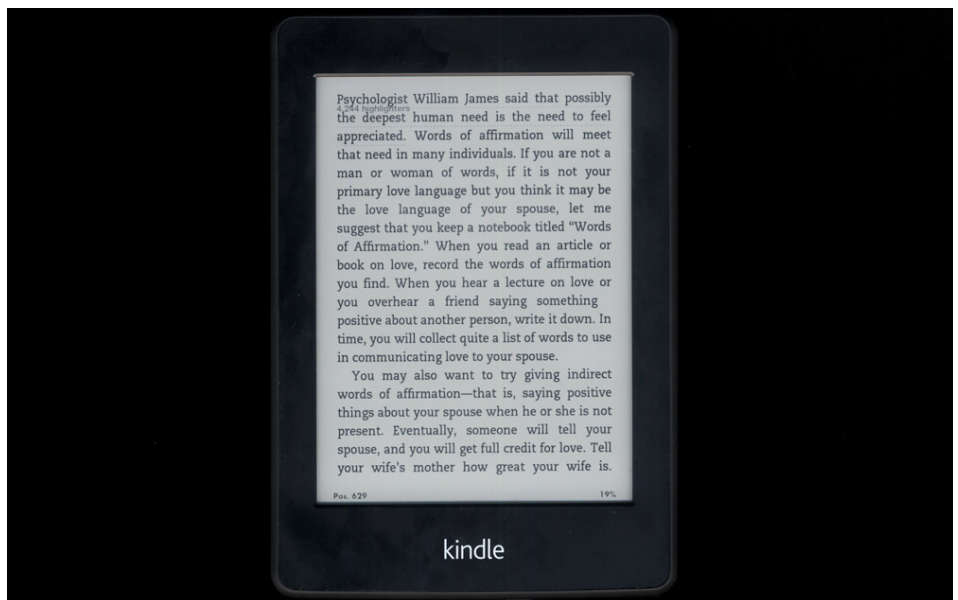
“I think academia is the most affected by that type of anxiety,” Silvio tells me. “There is a Twitter account called Academic Pain and it deals with this issue, with some ironic detachment. People talk a lot about the memetic potential of the Alt-Right, and I think starting from that type of memetics, based on self-deprecation, is an interesting



starting point. It would be useful to see who produces these memes and understand if they can become a flag for a movement.” Self-deprecation might feel a little to Seinfeldian, edging on Normcore, but what Lorusso is aiming for is a type of dialectic shock treatment. “Another thing I see is that schools, especially design schools, are strongly encouraged to take political positions and get involved,” he continues, “but paradoxically that could become problematic, with the risk of reducing activism to a 6-month project - working in a protected space, a sandbox for activism. Think of the 1977 movement: students were handing out flyers outside of factories, now it is much more atomized.” Instead of designer competitions to solve the world’s problems, then, an aesthetic strategy could be to renounce institutional cool altogether. “Perhaps the best thing for an enlightened school would be to go back to a grey, oppressive bureaucratic regime. I think that’s the dilemma of school as a space of organization. The greyness of brutality, which is very cool now, is not something I wish for, but I wonder what it would engender. Perhaps a boring school would defeat the neo-liberal compulsion towards self-optimization. We should aim towards boredom, bureaucracy, greyness.”

Ultimately, though, what Silvio feels is needed is a new set of “slogans, memes and chants” for the Entreprenariat, maybe even drawing inspiration from the antagonistic magic of the Alt-Right.

In one of his most interesting Entreprenariat posts, before a final appeal to San Precario, Lorusso writes: “The emotional is political, and as such it must be acknowledged. The sphere of affectivity shouldn’t be confined to the traditional boundaries of reproductive



Networked Optimization, Silvio Lorusso and Sebastian Schmieg (2013)

labor and the ones surrounding the exploitation –often self-exploitation– of passion and enthusiasm. Furthermore, the emotional shouldn’t be limited to its positive spectrum: we must express discomfort. ‘One laments to find comrades’, to paraphrase Breton. Agonize to organize. Hopefully, this attitude would lead to an unconditional form of solidarity, and to a refusal of an idea of class based on the comparison of material deprivation. Understanding people as emotional subjects, instead of economical ones, requires mutual faith.” Perhaps an aesthetics of productive anxiety, then, can be a start.

## ■ NICOLA BOZZI

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## NICOLA BOZZI

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# EVIL WEB BUSINESSES, ROMANCE SCAMS AND PHONE FRAUD

Three artistic  
case studies  
deconstructing  
scammers online  
identities

by Linda Kronman, Andreas Zingerle





Megacorp. Installation view (detail)

Since 2010 we have collaborated as the KairUs Art+Research collective focusing on the thematic of Internet fraud and online scams. Subjects of our research are online scammers, vigilante communities of scambaiters and anti-fraud activists, and their use of storytelling and technology. In several artworks, we created virtual characters with their on-line representations to be able to safely reply to Internet scammers business proposals and dive into their persuasive story worlds. Scamming is a global phenomenon and victims can be found everywhere with no difference in gender, age or race. To persuade the victim into paying money upfront, the scammers create story worlds with 'get rich quickly' schemes that seem 'too good to be true'. The scammers draw on emotions like greed, empathy or love. Over centuries the basic scheme has adapted to new modes of communication: letters, telegraph, fax, phone and Internet. (Brunton, 2012)

There are online communities of so-called 'Scambaiters' who fight back against online criminals. The act of scambaiting arose as a counterattack to the so-called '419 scams' (1). This online vigilante communities investigate scam emails and implement social engineering (2) techniques to document, report or warn potential victims. Scambaiters are anti-fraud activists who often use similar tactics as scammers, e.g. inventing a scenario and impersonate others to increase the chances that the victim releases sensitive information or money. (Zingerle, 2014) Scambaiters have their own personal motivations to justify their actions. Their motives can range from community service and status elevation to revenge for being a victim of a similar scam in the past. (Tuovinen et al., 2007) Through the documentation and sharing of these plots, scambaiters waste the scammers' time, exploit their resources and raise awareness about online fraud. They organize them-

selves on forums like thescambaiters.com or 419eater.com, the latter with over 65000 registered users from all over the world. These forums focus on everyday scam types and members follow their own strategies and ethics when in contact with scammers.

Recent publications (Nooney et al., 2014, Renner, 2012) that address scambaiting communities mainly focus on how scambaiters troll, prank and humiliate scammers by posting ridiculous photos of them on online forums and putting them on a 'virtual pillory' (3). In our research, we found that the strategies to fight online fraud go far beyond public shaming.

Over the last years, we followed these communities and created several media art installations that show the activist methods of scambaiting communities. In the following paragraphs, we want to present three of our recent artistic case studies that relate to



strategies and technologies used by fraudsters and anti-fraud activists.

### Artistic case studies

1. The Megacorp. evil business conglomerate: In the last years, the web has been increasingly used for end user e-commerce to buy goods and services. As our everyday consumption activities move online the number of deceptive websites grow. According to research fake websites comprise nearly 20% of the entire web, and 70%

of “.biz” and 35% “.us” domain pages analyzed in a sampling of 105 million web pages were fake. Scammers use them to pose as trustworthy and professional with the intent to trick people. An anti-fraud activists group called ‘Artists against 419’ (AA419) hosts the biggest open-access database of fake websites. As of May 2017, this forum has detected over 120,000 fraudulent business websites.

They use “passive reconnaissance” and “open source intelligence” (osint)

tools to gather information to file reports with the hosting provider to get the websites taken off the web. Since 2007, the group members discontinued using web programs such as “Lad Vampire” or “Muguito” to run “Denial of Service” (DDoS) attacks against the websites and instead now use their own tools and written reports to maintain a good relationship with hosting providers and law enforcement. (Cain, 2004, Brenner, 2007)

Our research of the AA419 database led to a broader investigation of how this community tracks fake business websites and reports them. Additionally, we wanted to visualize the database by collecting a sample of 1000 fraudulent companies under the umbrella of one big evil corporate conglomerate that wants to take over the world. Inspired by its equally powerful counterparts in science fiction we decided to call it ‘Megacorp.’. The term was coined by William Gibson and inspired many other authors of the dystopian cyberpunk science fiction genre to create megacorps in their fiction, amongst others the Tyrell corp. (Do Androids dream of Electric sheep), Encom corp. (Tron), Weyland-Yutani (Alien series), Cyberdyne skynet systems (Terminator).

‘Megacorp.’ visualizes the overall business segments and countries where these fraudulent businesses claim to be present. As a part of the project an interim report was published and in an exhibition set-up, visitors have the chance to browse locally through the repository of the fraudulent websites. Additionally, a corporate presentation video and a location reconnaissance video reflect both the imaginary and the real world outreach of the Megacorp.



Megacorp. Installation setup

### 1.1. Open Source Intelligence Tools

AA419 activists use various vernacular tools and social engineering techniques in order to run background checks on suspicious business websites. Open source intelligence (osint) refers to intelligence that has been derived from publicly available sources both on- and offline. (Mann, 2008) These tools are used in ethical passive reconnaissance to gather as much information about the target as possible. (Bansal and Arora, 2012).

In this version of reconnaissance, activists and hacktivists seek to gain information that will support their political causes or other such ethical motivations. Combining information derived from; whois database queries, Domain name service (DNS) entries, company registrars or PR-material provides a base to file reports for hosting providers and DNS registrars. Law enforcement officials may also use passive reconnaissance as part of a criminal investigation. Ethical or not, passive reconnaissance is always done without the authorization of the person or organization that is being targeted. (Glassman and Kang, 2012) This leads to an effective combination of classical social engineering attacks on the target, which in turn can be used to harvest more information.

Once a suspicious website is detected, forum members judge the look & feel of the website: Are photos squeezed to fit in certain places? Are logos pixelated or badly manipulated to fit into an image? Is the domain name spelled correctly? Is the contact email the same as the domain name or is it a free-to-use webmail service?

All these questions have to be checked and can expose a fraudulent business.

Furthermore, legal meta-data like trade registry number, VAT number or the company address can be checked.

By doing a whois lookup on a targeted domain, you can see when a domain was registered, updated and how long this registration is valid. Using a reverse IP-address lookup tool it is possible to gain more insight about all the different websites and domains hosted on that IP-address. Often scammers run several websites at once and it is just easier, cheaper and more convenient to host them under the same provider. This way, it is often possible to observe the working methods of a group of scammers who operate several websites at once.

This and further open source intelligence gets reported on the AA419 forum, frequently moderated and added to the database. After that, it is possible to file a “Terms of Service (TOS) and Acceptable Use Policy (AUP) Violation” report email and sent it to the hosting provider, asking the abuse team to double check the website in question and take it offline.

### 1.2. Data gathering

To reach the sample of 1000 companies the data gathering process took several months. In this time the AA419-database was visited on a daily basis and websites were automatically downloaded using a site scraper tool. The scraped websites were analyzed and categorized according to the business segment, street address, used colors, registered city, and country. Once we reached our goal and gathered 1000 companies we grouped our initial 20 business segments down to 10. Great deals of our holdings are clones of existing companies websites pub-

lished under non-legit domains. These websites, especially in the Banking & Finance segment, are used for phishing, and according to the Anti-Phishing Working Group’s Report (4) there were at least 1,220,523 unique phishing attacks worldwide during 2016, which is a 65 percent increase over 2015. When analyzing different cities and countries we focused on the top 5 and examined what the division of business segments was in these geographical areas.

### 1.3. Data visualization

To visualize the gathered data and to tell a compelling narrative about the fake business conglomerate we decided to re-enact a corporate presentation in form of a fair booth. To achieve this we highlighted the main parts of the data visualizations on roll-up posters and created a corporate image show-reel that gives a fast overview of key figures and the global outreach. We present all the gathered material in form of an interim report and on a website (5) visitors can browse through the 1000 acquired companies alphabetically, sorted by country and by business segment.

Another video showed some of the companies’ websites and our attempt of ‘physical reconnaissance’ where we visited the addresses where the companies claimed to have their headquarters to see what is actually there. Following the situationist ‘dérive’ approach (Ford, 2005) we visited several headquarters in the cities Accra, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Hamburg, Helsinki, London, New York, Paris or Vancouver. Once at the supposed business address we observed the building and its surrounding and searched for traces for the fraudulent online business. From each location,



we took photos and filmed the main entrances in order to document any suspicious activities. In some places we asked a concierge or shop owners about the company, and if the previous owner could have been running the website. A documentation of the walks became part of the 'Passive reconnaissance' video and exact walking directions for two London walks were posted on the artist's website. (6)

During the 'credible fiction - deceptive realities' workshop, we extended the video with a 'virtual reconnaissance' of companies addresses. In the media competence workshop that was tailored to test the anti-fraud activist tools with diverse participants, we mainly used Open-Street-Map, Google maps, and local company registrars to figure out which companies are registered at certain addresses. The collected screenshots were added to the existing video, adding the outcome of the workshop to the exhibited installation.

## 2. Forensic fantasies #2 Identity theft

'Forensic Fantasies' is a series of three artworks dealing with data breaches of private information. In the artworks, we use data that was recovered from hard-drives that were illegally dumped in West Africa. Despite international regulations, recyclers gain higher profits by selling electronic scrap through informal channels, than properly processing it at advanced facilities in their home countries. Through various trade routes, electronic waste often ends up in developing countries where valuable metals and materials are extracted in highly toxic environments causing both health hazards and ecological disasters. Reports suggest, that at these

e-waste dumps, criminals extract data from hard-drives to demand payments from their pre-owners or to resell the information.

In summer 2014 we visited one of the biggest electronic-waste dump in the world, Agbogbloshie in Accra, Ghana. A local guide took us to the Agbogbloshie dumpsite where we witnessed ongoing recycling processes like the arriving of containers from the nearby Tema shipyard. People try to reuse, repair or recycle functioning components, still due to a lack of technical equipment the recycling process is very basic but very toxic for the workers and the environment. Most electronics reached their end-of-life state and by dismantling the devices, components like power packs, batteries, CPUs, storage mediums, casings, motors and circuit boards are collected and sold in bulk. Parts that cannot be used or sold in this separation process land on the ground where youngsters handpick cables and PCB parts or use loudspeaker magnets for collecting tiny metal parts. This way the young scavengers still try to extract precious metals like copper, gold, silver or aluminum from the scrap on the ground.

Besides this physical separation of discarded e-waste criminals try to recycle personal data by wading through hard drives and extracting information to blackmail the pre-owners:

*[...] With the mountains of hard drives piling up as part of the dumping of e-waste in Ghana, scammers will find it*

*even easier to steal all the information they want for scams. (7)*

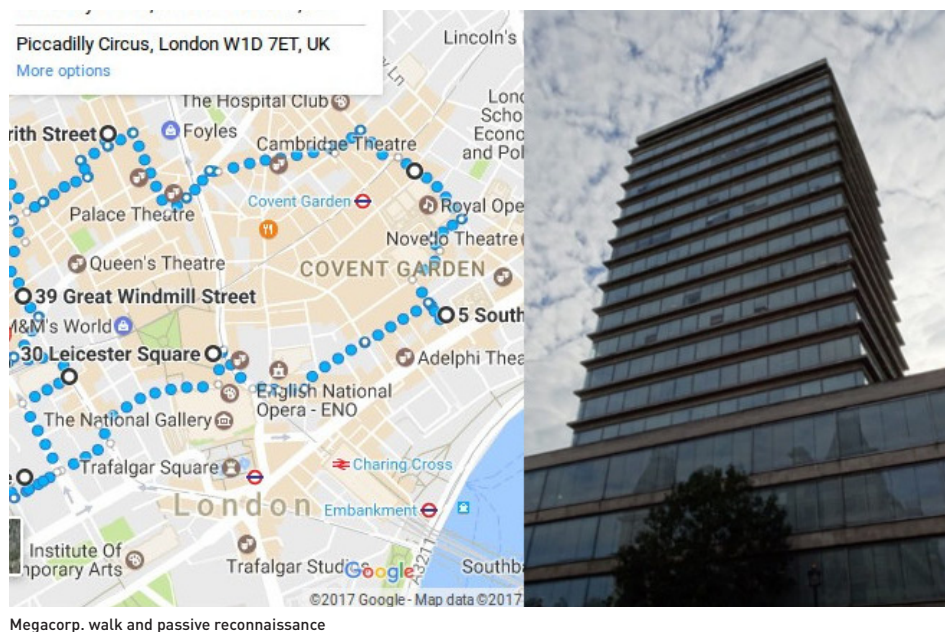
We were curious to sample probe if it is actually that easy to recover data from a discarded hard drive from the Agbogbloshie e-waste dump so we started talking with recyclers and also asked if they sell the hard drives they just dismantled from the computers. We were able to buy 22 hard drives and bring them to Europe. Our main questions were if we could recover any data from the drives and if so, could the data be potentially used and abused?

## **E-WASTE CRIMINALS TRY TO RECYCLE PERSONAL DATA BY WADING THROUGH HARD DRIVES AND EXTRACTING INFORMATION TO BLACKMAIL THE PRE- OWNERS**

The trilogy 'Forensic Fantasies' reflects on these questions after recovering data from six of the hard-drives. Data that was possibly ones believed to be deleted, trashed and forever gone, has now resurfaced. We know that dealing with data is a rather lucrative business today, yet data points are only valuable when connected to others, revealing patterns of behavior and desires. Selling the content of a hard-drive to data brokers is worth less than selling its spare parts to a company in the data-recovery business. What can make a hard-drive valuable, on the other hand, is sensitive personal data that can be abused, including access to online banking or shopping accounts, private images for blackmailing and harassment, or identity theft. The potential abusing of data is the focal point of these works, illustrating a number of 'worst case scenarios' based on the recovered data. On the other hand most of the recovered data, when lacking personal meaning turns to gigabytes of junk, that has no value. A hard-drive with







Megacorp. walk and passive reconnaissance

recoverable data poses an opportunity to find something of value, nevertheless most often this turns out to be just another ‘forensic fantasy’.

## #2: Identity theft

The second artwork of the “Forensic Fantasies” series focuses on the phenomena of romance scamming. These scammers conduct identity theft by copying bulks of images of attractive people to create fraudulent profiles on social media platforms or dating channels. The scammers pose to be in love with their victim and after gaining their trust they lure them to give gifts and money, always hiding behind their constructed identity. On one of the hard-drives, we found several images of two attractive ladies. Through a reverse image research, especially on romance scam warning forums, we figured out that the woman’s photos are often abused in identity-theft scenarios. Further, we found over 40 active social media profiles, that uses the images of these girls. Both women have made a career as webcam girls and share a lot of personal photos and videos of themselves publicly online. We suspect that the images

were also copied to this hard-drive to create and sustain some of the fraudulent profiles. In this artwork 18 of the fraudulent online profiles using the same images found on the hard-drive are combined with Nollywood found footage clips that address the topic of romance scams and ‘sakawa’ rituals. West African Nollywood films, mainly Nigerian and Ghanaian low-budget films, have their own way of dealing with the online scamming phenomenon, which is a recognized problem in these countries. The films portray young male adults who are in need of quick money, most often not driven by personal advantage but to help some close relative out of a miserable situation, often caused by an act of nature beyond control. They set up fake dating profiles and impersonate young attractive women or soldiers based in conflict regions to scam wealthy westerners. Unskilled and luckless they obey every given advice by more experienced fellow fraudsters. To increase their prospects of success some fraudsters consult priests for religious rituals and sacrifices. This act is referred to as ‘sakawa’, a whole sub-genre of popular movies and teledramas. (Riedel, 2015) In the

video installation, three of the popular drama series are collaged together to show the scripted patterns of the very moralized stories.

## 3. Let’s talk business:

In many of today’s fraud schemes, phone numbers play an important role. Fake businesses or individuals can appear more legitimate, and the phone numbers enable a faster, more personal contact with the victims. When scammers set-up a fake email address at free webmail services like Gmail or Outlook, popular VoIP services like Google talk or Skype are included and can be used for free. These tools enable the scammers to hide their identities with fake names and bogus business websites.

Typically these scams involve storytelling and some sort of social engineering, where the fraudster creates a hyper-realistic ‘too good to be true’ situation for a mark, in order to extract sensitive data and/or money from the victim. (Maggi, 2010) (Mitnick, 2002) Anti-scam activists host informative websites and forums where scams can be reported and suspicious business proposals discussed. There are several forums dedicated to either specific scam genres (e.g. romance scams or rental scams) or used technology (e.g. email scams, phone scams). One of these platforms is ‘Scamcallfighters.com’, a non-profit organization that maintains a user-contributed database of phone numbers that are used in scam attempts. This organization aims to help people who are under threat of financial loss due to phone scams. On their website, they widely publish scam related phone numbers, details of scam incidents and inform about ongoing cybercrime attacks.

Confidence tricksters often attack victims who have already been scammed, duping them to pay even more money. The best defense against phone scams is knowledge about this type of scams and a publicly available blacklist of phone numbers that are used by Internet criminals.

The artwork is an outcome of an exploration with the aim of understanding in which scam narratives phone numbers are used and how the narratives are extended when the scammers are approached by calling them. With the analysis of a sample probe of 374 emails, we wanted to see which business proposals are commonly used and how believable their proposals sound once we contacted them by phone. After categorizing the scam narratives we proceeded to call the scammers. Prior to calling scammers, we wanted to know what means were necessary to stay anonymous and safe without leaving a trail that could lead to us. When a connection to a scammer was established, the scammer was informed that the email was received, but not all relevant parts fully understood, so the situation and the next steps should be explained to us once again. Then the scammers had time to explain the situation and how we should proceed further.

The multi-channel audio installation 'Let's talk business' enables the visitor to listen to scammers who try to lure potential victims into advance fee payments. Using SPAM-cans as listening devices the visitor can listen to the scam stories of 'once-in-a-lifetime' business opportunities, distant relatives' beneficiaries, big lottery fortunes or helping people in need. According



Talking with recyclers at Agbogbloshie e-waste dump

## **WE WANT TO PROVIDE AN OPPORTUNITY TO BE ANONYMOUSLY CONNECTED WITH A NIGERIAN SCAMMER**

to Merriam-Websters dictionary, the naming of unwanted mass advertising as 'Spam' originates from 'the British television series Monty Python's Flying Circus in which chanting of the word Spam overrides the other dialogue'. The sketch premiered in 1970, but it took until the 1990s for mass emails, junk phone calls or text messages sent out by telemarketers to be called 'Spam'. While most of the scam emails tend to end up

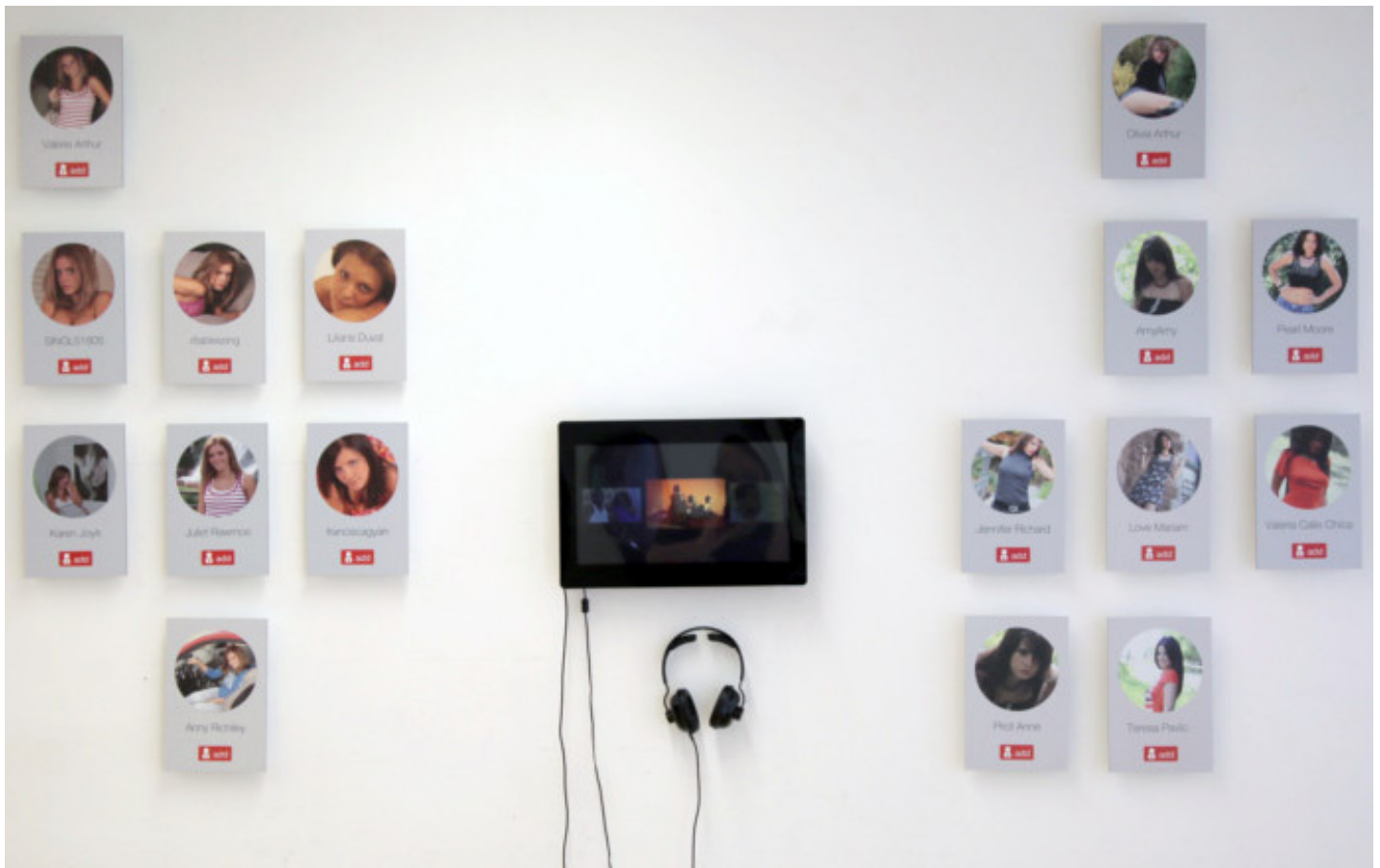
in the SPAM folder, we chose to mediate these stories through physical SPAM-cans. Contact microphones and audio players are attached to four of the cans so that visitors can listen to the scammers' different narratives that were recorded. One device has two buttons: one button connects the visitor to a randomly chosen Nigerian number from the scammer's database, the other button disconnects the call. We want to provide an opportunity to be anonymously connected with a Nigerian scammer. This gives an experience of being nervous about who will answer the phone, trying to understand the narrative, and judging

whether a potential victim would fall for such an offer or not. On a nearby wall, we installed two clocks that indicate the time difference between the 'local' time and the 'Nigerian' time. We also displayed the eight most common scam emails that we extracted from the sample probe of emails. We chose to call scammers from Nigeria since their phone number were widely used in the emails. Also when exhibiting the artwork we wanted to be able to reach scammers during their operation hours.

### **Conclusions:**

By combining artistic practices and scambaiting strategies we consider our artistic case studies as a type of activism, a genre where art and activism fuse. The presented artworks have been exhibited at festivals, in galleries, and at academic conferences. They also function as a basis for discussion to raise awareness, as we have presented them as case studies in a series of workshops that we organize in various contexts. The research and exploration of various scam methods have given us a wider view on how constructed identities and storytelling





Megacorp. Installation setup

are used in scam scenarios. Furthermore, we observed a wide-range of strategies that scambaiters apply for their causes. A reflective scambaiter with the right intentions can be seen as a disruptive anti-fraud activist, who jams the scammers workflow and alerts potential victims by exposing the scam schemes. This can be done in discussion forums, by collecting databases of dubious emails and websites as well as through artworks. Scams and fraud have been around for a long time, this dark side of the net will not disappear. While actors are diverse and scam strategies continue to evolve we need to constantly review our approaches to scams, scammers, and scambaiting.

■ LINDA KRONMAN, ANDREAS ZINGERLE

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#### Notes:

1 - 419-scam is a form of advance fee fraud that mainly uses telephone and email as a communication medium. The number '419' refers to the section of the Nigerian Criminal Code dealing with fraud but is not limited to fraud schemes originating from Nigeria. '419-scam' or 'Four-one-niner' became a common term for all advance fee fraud scams that are carried out over the Internet, no matter whether they originate from Nigeria or from a different country.

2 - Social engineering is an act of psychologically manipulating people's decision-making processes, so that they take actions that may not in their best interest, e.g. releasing confidential information. Social engineering is often one in



Calling a scammer

many steps of a fraud scheme and can be executed online and offline.

3 - The pillory was a device made of a wooden or metal framework erected on a post, with holes for securing the head and hands, formerly used for punishment by public humiliation and often further physical abuse. <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/pillory>, accessed April 27, 2017

4 - APWG Phishing Activity Trends Report, [https://docs.apwg.org/reports/apwg\\_trends\\_report\\_q4\\_2016.pdf](https://docs.apwg.org/reports/apwg_trends_report_q4_2016.pdf), accessed April 21, 2017

5 - In the exhibition we present the whole offline archive of scraped websites, the online version just features screenshots of the scraped websites, <http://megacorp.kairus.org>, accessed April 27, 2017.

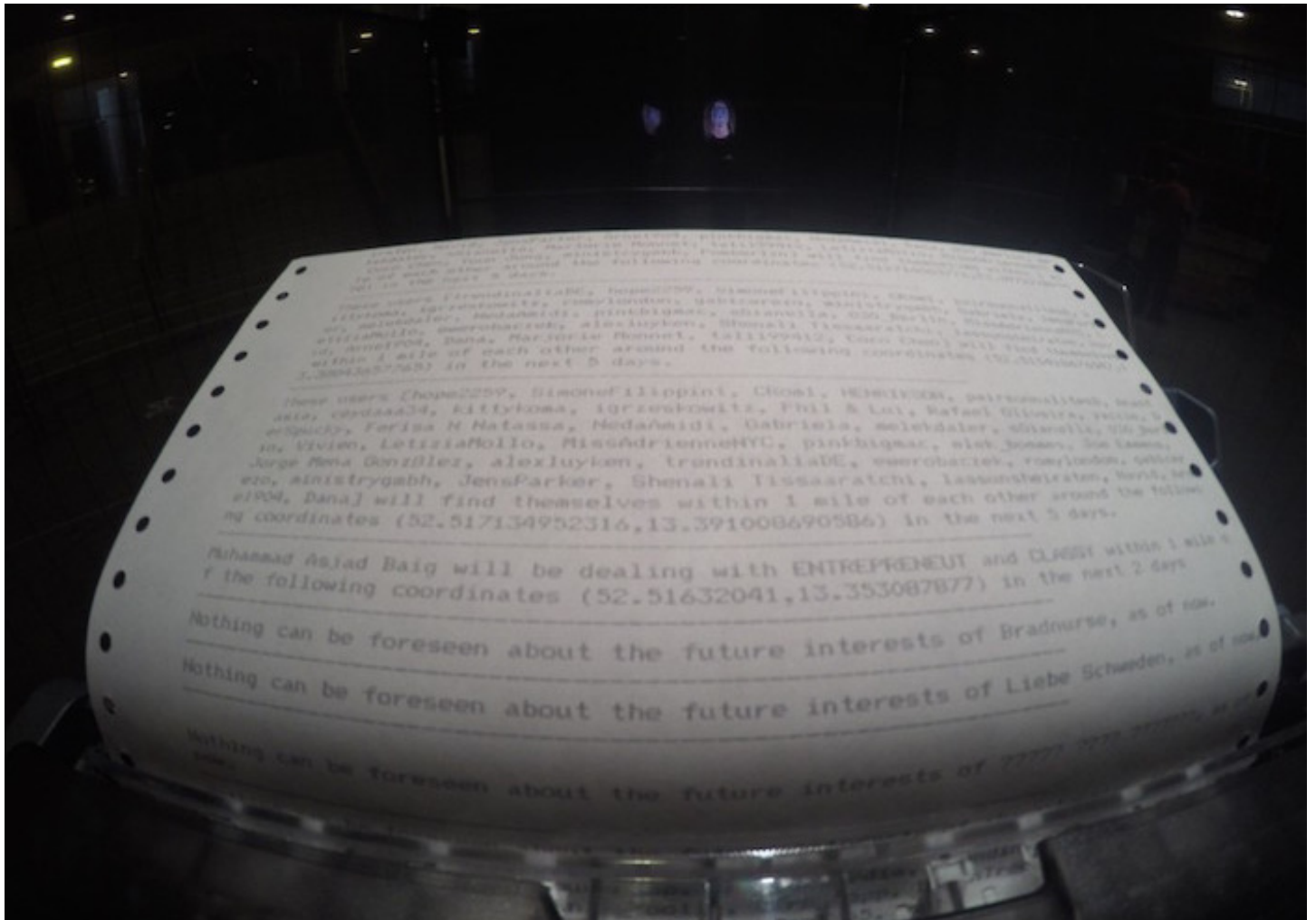
6 - Passive reconnaissance: "Central London walk": Megacorp. conglomerate, London, UK. <http://kairus.org/passive-reconnaissance-walk-1-megacorp-conglomerate-london-uk/>, accessed April 21, 2017.

7 - Sydney Abugri: GHANA: Internet criminals cash in on e-waste dumping, <http://preview.tinyurl.com/khlluwz>, accessed April 21, 2017.

## LINDA KRONMAN, ANDREAS ZINGERLE

KAIRUS IS A COLLECTIVE OF TWO ARTISTS LINDA KRONMAN (FINLAND) AND ANDREAS ZINGERLE (AUSTRIA). OUR WORK FOCUSES ON HUMAN-COMPUTER AND COMPUTER MEDIATED INTERACTION. SINCE 2010 WE HAVE WORKED WITH THE THEMATIC OF INTERNET FRAUD AND ONLINE SCAMS, CONSTANTLY SHIFTING OUR FOCUS AND THEREFORE APPROACHING THE THEME FROM A NUMBER OF PERSPECTIVES LIKE DATA SECURITY, ETHICS OF VIGILANTE COMMUNITIES, NARRATIVES OF SCAM E-MAILS, SCAM & TECHNOLOGIES. BESIDES THE ARTWORKS, WE PUBLISH ACADEMIC RESEARCH PAPERS RELATED TO OUR PROJECTS AND THROUGH WORKSHOPS AND RESEARCH LABS, WE CONTEXTUALIZE OUR RESEARCH TO WIDER DISCOURSES LIKE DATA PRIVACY, ACTIVISM, HACKING CULTURE, AND DISRUPTIVE ART PRACTICES.





Stakhanov, artificial intelligence generates possible future stories of the citizens of Berlin, using BigData

# ALGORITHMIC AUTOBIOGRAPHY: A NEW LITERARY GENRE

by Salvatore Iaconesi, Oriana Persico

## A Data-driven Homicide

N.S. was sweating. The run uphill, at the end of the final part of his daily run, had the effect of burning many calories and of positively stimulating his cardio-respiratory activity, but it also seemed to cause his heart to explode. The digital wristband connected to his earphones started emitting a nervously rhythmic sound, to the beat of his crazed blood pump.

N.S. started thinking about the moment in which he would have published his daily run on AttitudeBook: 12 kilomet-

ers was not bad for a university professor used to a sedentary life.

His raving heartbeat was not the only thing that was troubling him, today.

He seemed to have the impression of being followed.

It all started a few days ago: a systematic sensation of being the object of observation, confirmed by what he thought was certain evidence: that boy over there, picking up the phone and turning around just in time to avoid being spot-



ted; that other one, pretending to be-  
ing there merely by chance, and, in-  
stead, N.S. had seen him in 4 different  
parts of the city already, at the exact  
places where N.S. had planned going.  
The guy would be waiting, checking  
his phone, looking precisely towards  
the direction from where N.S. would  
be coming from. And he would im-  
mediately divert the gaze as soon as he  
realized that he had been spotted.

Or the strange login reports on his  
Quantified Self accounts, from places  
in his town, but from different com-  
puters and devices. Or the glitches, in  
his smart watch, wearables, social net-  
working accounts, emails, and even  
credit cards, in which systems started  
bringing up password recovery pro-  
cedures, phone confirmation dialogs  
and more. N.S. changed all of his pass-  
words and codes, so he was convinced  
that there was really nothing to worry  
about. But not today.

Uphill. Heartbeat. Breath in, out, in,  
out. Almost made it. At the top of this  
next hill was the climax, the apex of  
the run, and the point at which he  
would have been most tired and en-  
ergetically drained, according to his  
wristband. So much that his doctor,  
two months ago, while N.S. was at the  
same spot, sent him an instant mes-  
sage: "Hey! Take it easy! The notific-  
ation which just came in said that you  
were having a heart attack! I looked on  
the map and I saw you were running...  
but don't push yourself too hard, take  
it easy.."

Uphill. Sweat. Heartbeat. Breath in,  
out, in, out. Then it's all downhill,  
alone, in the beautiful park.

And, then, when he completes the up-  
hill curve, N.S. finds them.

They are 5. Calm. Standing along the  
path, exactly where he would have  
slowed down for a second, to drink  
a sip of water. Exactly where there is  
no network signal coverage. Exactly  
where every day he stops to do some  
exercises, while looking at the land-  
scape from above, as documented in  
many images he shared online.

They are silent. They smile. N.S.  
stops. he wipes the sweat from the  
back of his neck with his little towel.  
They step forward and say "We know  
everything about you, even things you  
don't know."

### Who writes our autobiographies?

What is an autobiography?

Are we writing an autobiography by  
leaving our traces on social networks,  
every day? What about the large  
quantities of other digital traces we  
leave behind in our lives?

What happens when non-human and  
algorithmic subjects/  
entities come into play,  
increasing the com-  
plexity of our interac-  
tions and influencing  
the process of construc-  
tion and perception of  
the self?

We progressively expose ourselves  
more, every day, consciously and un-  
consciously, with consequences that  
are difficult to grasp: about time, iden-  
tity, memory, rights.

The Self is a puzzle that philosophy  
– and more recently psychology and  
cognitive sciences – has always dealt  
with.

Approaching this complex matter  
will lead us to frightening and fun-  
damental questions concerning our  
existence, consciousness, the ways in  
which we perceive space and time,  
and how we understand, produce  
and transfer knowledge: Do "I" exist?  
Does the external world exist? What  
is the "subject"? What is the "object"?  
What is memory? Are my memories  
"true"?...

The list of questions is much longer  
and the puzzle is unsolvable in one  
single self-conclusive image. But with  
a few simple observations we can try  
to inspect them by watching our beha-  
viors, which is a good starting point:

*The self is a membrane:* it acts simultan-  
eously as the separation and meeting  
point between the subject and the out-  
side world, and as such it allows us to  
establish relationships (between the I,  
the others, the world);

*The self changes* but also remains the  
same: for example, we can recognise  
ourselves in an old  
childhood photo as  
opposed to the adults  
we have become;

Despite the great  
complexity that the  
self raises as a philo-  
sophical object, *we*

*constantly and spontaneously "speak"*  
*about our self* – everyday, since our  
childhood.

Jerome Bruner (1997) argues that the  
self is a matter of language which we  
can develop naturally to articulate a  
first discourse on the self. But to give  
shape to an autobiography (under  
written or oral form) is a different  
process: we need to put the self in a

**WE PROGRESSIVELY  
EXPOSE OURSELVES  
MORE, EVERY DAY,  
CONSCIOUSLY AND  
UNCONSCIOUSLY**





larger context (which includes culture, our beliefs, our relations and us). We have to “tell a story” about ourselves, which means that we have a narrative problem to solve: not only create a story, but a story which makes sense (to us and possibly to others).

This is why, according to Bruner, we can consider the self as a narrative process, rather than an “object”, which allows us to create coherent narratives about our lives along space, time and cultures.

The self is strictly connected to memory processes and identity.

Not surprisingly, autobiographical memories are recognized as an important criterion of personal identity. Over the past two decades, as S. Smith and J. Watson (2010) demonstrate how three terms have become central in autobiography:

performativity;  
positionality;  
relationality.

In theories of performativity, identity is seen as something “enacted and reiterated through cultural norms and discourses [...] an effect of storytelling”.

Positionality shifts the attention to the cultural and historical placement of the subject, and “subject positions” are viewed as “effects of social relations whose power is distributed unevenly and asymmetrically across difference”. Relationality refers to the idea that “the narrator’s story is often refracted through the stories of others” and emphasizes the subject’s lack of autonomy.

All of these terms criticize the universal, stable and autonomous idea of individual, and shift the focus to the idea of the subject in process and in context.

*We are never alone when we write our life story.* Other people are always with us, with their presence, influences, relations, interactions, shaping not only our behaviors, but also what we remember, what we feel as relevant, important, worthwhile, changing the ways in which we express it, for whom, and the contracts we establish by expressing ourselves: what to show, what to hide, how to interpret it, how to shape it.

*We don’t create our autobiography out of nothing.* Rather, the story’s outline and plot are the result of numerous impulses and micro/macro events (conscious or unconscious), relations, power relations, one’s own memories and memories of others.

*Our autobiographies, just like the self, are a process:* the result of a constant remix. Rather than in “originality” authorship finds its basis in “composition”, in the continuous process of “sewing the pieces together” that

the self operates in order to give shape to the outline and plot of our lives, turning them into narrative material with which we can mould identities. More than “authors” we are “curators” of our own story, which turns out to be a fragmented object formed by a mixture of elements and materials, acted by multiple subjects. The only seemingly compact definition of autobiography (“writing one self’s story”) shows us a polymorphic and recom-

binant nature, which nowadays intertwines with (and lives through) new ubiquitous, technologically mediated dimensions.

A new space exists in which we are confronted with unprecedented actors and materials: the software and the algorithmic matter. Most of the time their logic is opaque and inaccessible to us, from the ways in which algorithms watch and classify us; to the simple knowledge and perception of all the data we produce; to the algorithmic influence on our perceptions which comes about as software agents become able to shape our media environment around us, according to logics which are beyond our grasp and understandings.

Finding new paths to access, interact and play with it, is a new challenge for contemporary human beings and societies which directly affects the possibility to build, own and fully understand the processes behind the construction of the self, our identities, our intimate relation with time, our personal and collective memories.

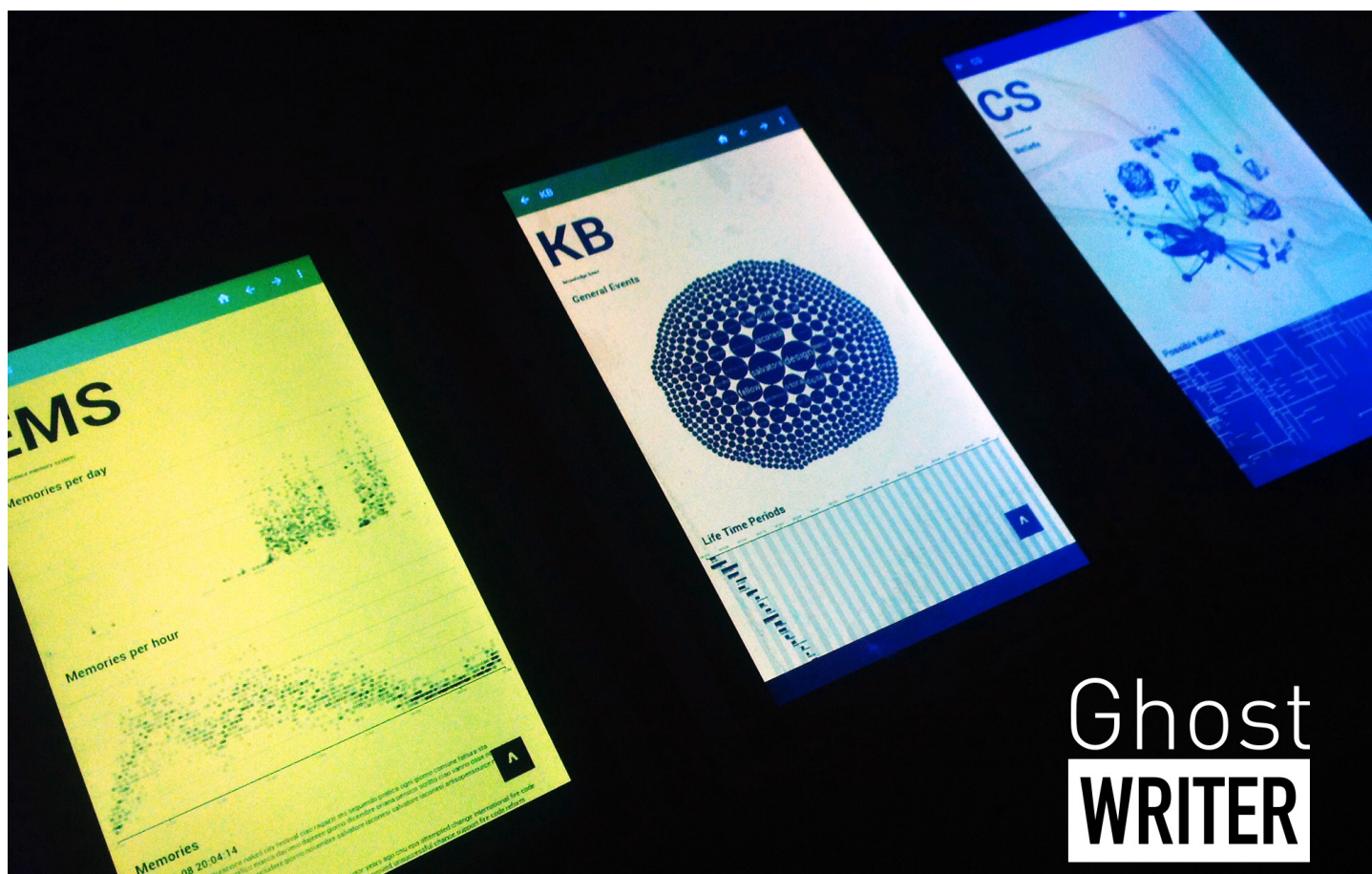
### A new literary genre: the Algorithmic Autobiography

To explore these evolutive tensions we created a new literary genre: the Algorithmic Autobiography, under the form of the GhostWriter project, commissioned by the Goethe Institut for the Streaming Egos project, and curated by Marco Mancuso and Filippo Lorenzin for Digicult.

On the one hand, we confronted with the emergence of new forms of writing and of non-human authors, which are already influencing our relations and the ways in which we can perceive/perform/build our self-narratives. On

## A NEW SPACE EXISTS IN WHICH WE ARE CONFRONTED WITH UNPRECEDENTED ACTORS AND MATERIALS





Ghost Writer, the three augmented books

the other hand, we tried to deal with the opaque and hidden nature of these writings and authors, mainly the software agents, algorithms, artificial intelligences which fill many aspects of our ordinary experience, and the organizations which control them.

Whether we realize it or not, whether we want it or not, a number of subjects and entities continuously keep track of the digital traces we produce, constructing multiple versions of narrations of our lives, each with different focuses, parameters, points of view, perspectives.

These are, to all effects, biographies. Even more: they are two times auto-biographies. Auto, because they are automatically collected, processed and composed. And auto, because we produce and express these bits of memory ourselves in our daily lives, through our ordinary performances, like entries in a ubiquitous diary.

If we can collect all of these bits, all these episodes, all of these digital traces in our ubiquitous diary, we can imagine to produce a novel form of autobiography. Currently, multiple algorithms do exactly this, collecting all of these bits about ourselves, classifying them, organizing them by time, topic, emotion, behavior, patterns, types, focuses and more.

These algorithms are the “ghostwriters” of our autobiographies. They already exist, as our ubiquitous diaries exist: they are just invisible to us.

Through this project we wanted to make them visible.

We wanted to create a new literary genre allowing this new form of writings to emerge, with all possible consequences: the *Algorithmic Autobiography*.

For this, we started to explore what happens to the construction of our life stories when algorithms and smart software agents enter the scene, together with information and knowledge bubbles, interfering and remediating our perception and possibility of perception of the world.

### Radicalized Constructivism

Sexton (1997) divides the history of knowing into three eras: premodern, modern and postmodern. The premodern era emphasizes dualism, idealism and rationalism. The modern era focuses on empiricism, logical positivism, scientific methodology. It is here that the idea of professional knowledge which is able to produce objective understandings of the world is born.

*The creation, rather than discovery, of knowledge is the main feature of the current postmodern, or construct-*



ivist, era. Sexton also highlights the epistemological evolution: while in modernism “truth” is discovered (and, thus, exists objectively), postmodernity requires participation to construct knowledge.

Constructivist reality does not allow justifying reality through “objective circumstances” (Neimeyer, 1995): all constructed meanings reflect a point of view.

In particular, George Kelly’s (1955/1991a, 1955/1991b) personal construct psychology (PCP) and personal construct theory (PCT) describes how people organize their experiences in bipolar dimensions of meaning (Raskin, 2002), or personal constructs.

These are constructed, not discovered (Burr, Butt, & Epting, 1997; Epting & Amerikaner, 1980). They don’t exist as a given, but are constructed to predict how the world and its participants might behave, and are continuously re-fabricated, used, tested and modified according to the results of the tests, by evaluating how effective they were in predicting life circumstances.

Von Glasersfeld (1984, 1995a, 1995b) and Maturana (1988; Maturana & Varela, 1992; Varela, 1984) propose radical versions of constructivism.

Von Glasersfeld, for example, stresses how human beings can fabricate understandings to better navigate *life no matter how they match an external reality*. This notion derives directly from Darwinian evolutionary theories and from Piaget’s cognitive development theory, but sees human cognition as a closed system: “adaptation does not mean adequation to an external world of things existing-in-themselves, but

rather improving the organism’s equilibrium, i.e., its fit, relative to experienced constraints”.

In this perspective, reality is “needed” only when our schemes fail and need adaptation: first, recognition (and self-representation) take place; second is the action; third is the expectation that the action produces the expected result. Perturbation of the schema does not originate from conflict with reality, but through internal and interpersonal transactions, which may or may not lead to more accurate representations of reality (Raskin, 2002). This is particularly interesting when framed with today’s Filter Bubbles (Pariser, 2012), and the ways in which they computationally and continuously enact information environments around us which are prone for confirmation biases to take place. Here, when we are progressively induced to interacting and relating only with subjects and theses which are compatible (if not the same all together) with our own, what happens to these process of increased accurate representation of reality? This kind of process has only recently began to be explored, and could contribute to give rise to the environments which are florid in welcoming fake news, post-truths, intolerance, racism, conspiracy theories and more.

Proceeding outward, towards social constructionism, we would find theses according to which people are not considered to have any stable and essential personality (Burr, 1995; Gergen, 1991, 1994).

Social constructionists describe the existence of a number of realities which is proportional to the number of cultures, contexts and forms of expression, and the same goes for selves

(Sampson, 1989), which become “multiphrenic” (Gergen, 1991).

Being a “person” depends on how people are talked about, their social practices and relationships (Burr, 1995).

In this sense, the role of language is critical: how people talk about themselves and the world determines the nature of their experiences (Raskin, 2002). This makes the study of power relations (for example in a Foucauldian sense, see Rabinow, 1984) a fundamental issue in social constructionism, as some of the ways in which language can be used to describe the world and relationships start dominating over others. This also implies the study of the performative aspects of language, and the ways in which language and power are the means to achieve specific, possibly authoritarian, objectives and goals.

Reality depends, here, on how groups of people collectively elaborate ideas. Gergen (1991, 1994) pointed out the complications which emerge when communication technologies enter the scene, enabling and causing individuals to be exposed to high numbers and qualities of social contexts. Gergen calls this condition saturated *multiphrenia*.

These are the medium and environments which function as the foundations onto which we build our personal stories, both the ones we use in our intimacy, to gain private understandings about our life story, and the ones we make public: our autobiographies.

How does all of this change when algorithms enter the stage?





## Life stories, Self narratives, in the age of Algorithms and Bubbles

Self-narratives (Gergen & Gergen, 1984) refer to the story constructed by individuals as they put self-relevant events in relation among themselves, in coherent ways (Cohler, 1979; Kohli, 1981). It is a tentative systematization of these events (deWaele & Harrd, 1976): one's current identity is not a surprise, but the result of a story, that often contributes deeply to "provide meaning and direction to one's life" (Bettelheim, 1976).

In the age of Hyperconnectivity, if one was called to produce an account of their life (especially if young individuals), they would most certainly use at least some degree of digital tools to explore their own memories and, thus, to be able to place them into a meaningful, correlated series.

They would access images, content, disseminated on platforms, devices, services. Some of this content would be obsolete, or placed on platforms which do not exist anymore. Some other content would be unusable, because hardware or software contexts have changed, because of different standards, software versions.

Some other of this content would be algorithmically processed.

This would be a really a complex remediation, as the algorithms would use their own complex logics to try and interpret what content would be more relevant for their user and more prone to generating revenue for the service provider, thus generating a selection and curation of content which would be representative of a complex, only partially knowable and accessible, reality.

This would create a peculiar scenario: in trying to compose the self narrative, the deck of cards would be shuffled, the card signs would not be the same, some cards would be missing according to some inexplicable logic, some cards would be 3 meters wide, while others would only a few micron across, or dug deep into a haystack.

Our possibility to reconstruct would be biased on the account of the effects of multiple strategies which would be financial, according to the revenue that different types of content may bring to the service providers; technical, for example due to the archival strategies of large systems; administrative, in multiple cases, such as for violations of terms of service, or for system policies; service, for example in the search for relevance, according to which systems try to interpret and provide the content which is more relevant to the user; location based, if users would find themselves in a location which is particularly relevant for a series of content; interaction based, for example according to the specific content the user is producing at that moment in time; and many more.

On top of that, this would also not only be a matter of the individual alone, but also be influenced by the relations which they would be forming with other individuals and contexts.

All of these and other variables and contextual conditions would expose the individual to a complex geography of content, which would largely de-

termine their capability to reconstruct their self-narrative and life story.

This would mean that constructing an auto-biography would be, as introduced with GhostWriter, a complex human/non-human interaction.

For example, in GhostWriter, the content of the autobiography is produced by systematically capturing the elements of the life story as they

emerge from all of those systems which are used to monitor and record the activities and actions of the individual: email, instant messaging, social networking, credit cards, wearable devices, domotics, quantified selves and

### THE ALGORITHMS WOULD USE THEIR OWN COMPLEX LOGICS TO TRY AND INTERPRET WHAT CONTENT WOULD BE MORE RELEVANT FOR THEIR USER

more.

In GhostWriter all of these data, information and knowledge would be assembled according to Conway's (200) Self-Memory System (SMS), providing yet another level of algorithmic remediation, and, then, it would be visualized and placed onto an interactive interface.

This setup, creates, again, a complex system.

As seen in another work called *Stakhanov* and presented at the trans-mediale festival in 2015 (Iaconesi, Persico, 2015), these remediations, interpretations, modelizations, predictions are executed according to the logics of the operators of these services, but they are not neutral. Through their interpretation (the Imago in Stakhanov's cosmology), they affect reality, modifying it and creating loops which converge at reality's represent-



ation, no matter how far this is from some other experienced version of it.

In this sense it would be interesting to understand how, in this novel literary genre, Gergen's components for construction of intelligible narrative would be formed and composed:

1. The Establishment of a Valued End Point
2. Selection of Events Relevant to the Goal State

### 3. The Ordering of Events

### 4. Establishing Causal Linkages

### 5. Demarcation Signs

Would all of these elements be chosen because they are effectively relevant for the individual, or to maximize probabilities for maximum revenue for the service provider, according to the algorithms' understanding of the individual's behavior?

And, even if it was the former item: would there be really any way to understand it, or to differentiate it from the latter option?

## Conclusions

After the Streaming Egos exhibit, which was featured in Dusseldorf on January 16-17th 2016, we had in our hands a new, perturbing, object.

If we have demonstrated that non-human forms of writing are already in place influencing our perception and the way in which we construct the self, what (social, anthropological, political, legal) consequences can the existence and wide accessibility of an "Algorithmic Autobiography" have on people's lives?

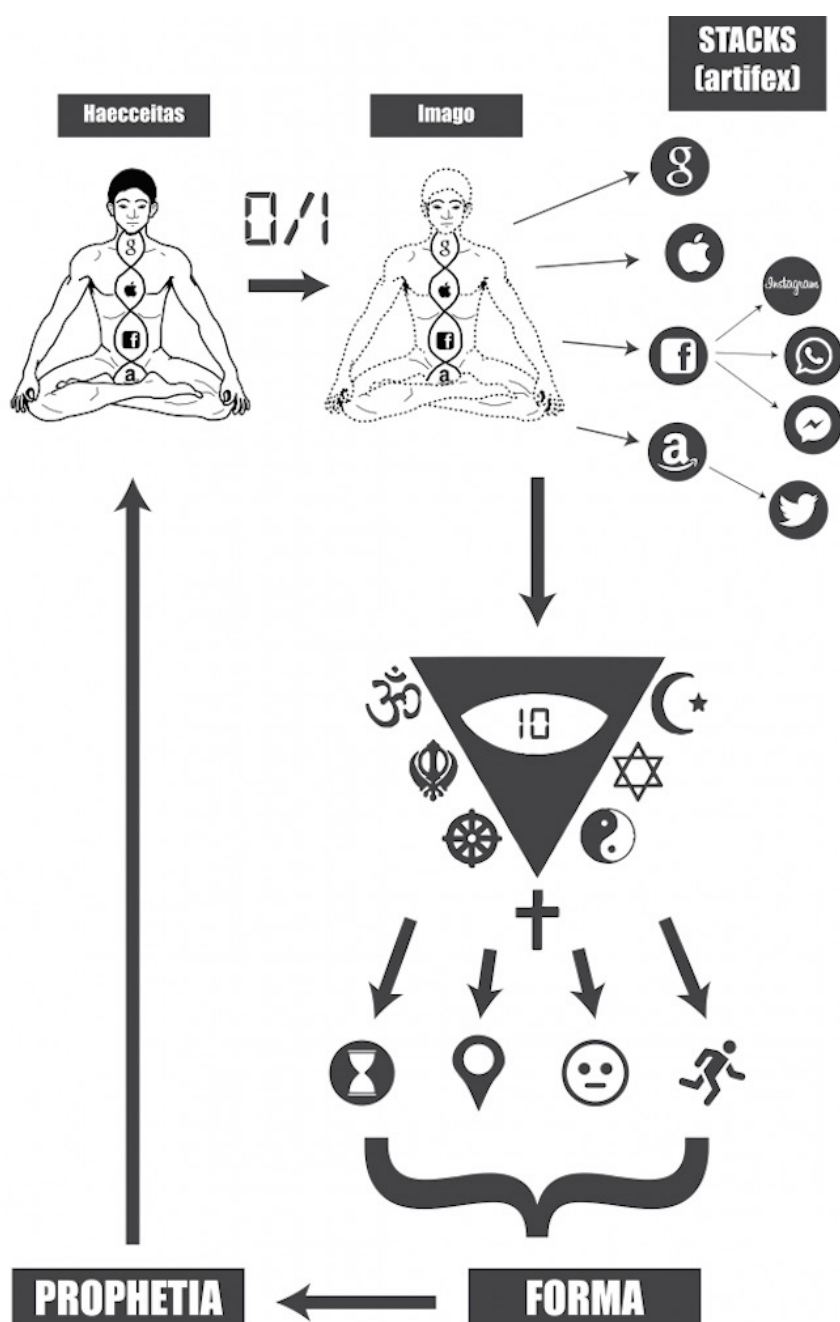
We want to conclude this article trying to expand this question.

**Recombinant, human/not human identities: a possibilistic vision of the "autobiographical pact"**

When we relate to an "autobiography" we accept to relate to "someone" which is telling us a "non-fiction", "truthful" story about "his/her" life: this is what scholar Philippe Lejeune defines as the "autobiographical pact" Which, he argues, is the condition for an autobiography to exist and to be considered as "valid".

It means that we recognize this "someone" (the "author") as a subject with a defined identity, and with precise responsibilities to us (the readers). In a word: we establish a "contract" (with social and even possible legal consequences).

In the context of the Algorithmic Autobiography, unprecedented types



Stakhanov, part of the cosmology of data





GhostWriter: architecture of self. View from the installation

of subjects (authors) can come into play. A couple, a class of students, a group of friends, a collective of artists, a company, an institution and so on, could decide to feed the GhostWriter, collecting and using their data sources: the result would be an “autobiography” attributable to and directly written by the couple, the class, the group, the collective, the company and the institution itself, here respectively recognised as the “authors” and as single defined identities. At the same time, one single person with multiple digital identities could publish multiple autobiographies (multiple, coexisting, even contradictory versions of the self) theoretically without violating the pact.

What we see here is a shift from a concept of identity based on the compact vision of “individual” to a more fluid, polymorphic and recombinant structure: a “multividual”, as prof. Massimo Canevacci Ribeiro calls it.

Individual is at the very basis of societies, in particular western societies: our ID and all sort of contracts we are allowed to stipulate are based on it.

- What happens when, starting from existence of a new literary genre and interacting with new types of cultural artifacts (books/publications in this case), we deal with new “multividual” authors?

What kind of new social interaction we can imagine (or need) to validate the autobiographical pact as described by Lejeune?

- What are the consequences at psychological, anthropological, political and legal levels, on people and society?

- What does a polymorphic, recombinant, multividual based ID look like? How can we design and validate it?

- Following the same logic, can we imagine new type of “contract” based

on multividuals? What do they look like? What are the consequences on property, work, marriage and so on?

- What are the rights of a multividual?

Things can get even more complicated.

We are now able to disseminate the environment with sensors.

We are building Smart Cities through this possibility, as well as smart homes, smart rural spaces, and smart schools, workplaces, kitchens, hospitals, brothels and bodies. With the Internet of Things we are populating our houses as well as our imaginaries with new connected objects and services. We are effectively transforming all of these objects/processes/products/services into potentially sentient agents, into potentially new types of subjects. This means that not only new types of human subject come into play, but



also non-humans ones: a apartment building, a square, a wood, a river, a fridge, our dog can now write their own autobiography and tell us their own life story, just like we do. The GhostWriter will not make any difference, because from its point of view there is really no difference: humans and not humans subjects are (or can easily become) data generators.

Unlike smart services, an autobiography is not something we just buy or consume: or better, the act of buying and consuming an autobiography culturally implies a reciprocal relation between the authors and the reader. Otherness is added to the equation, in potentially disruptive ways.

- What are the consequences (psychological, anthropological, political, legal) of a non-human or interspecies autobiography?
- Do non-human entities/subjects have rights?
- If yes, what kind of rights?
- What are the relations and roles formed through this further form of autobiography? After all, we would be the ones designing the sensors, writing the algorithms, establishing what is sensed and what is not, deciding what gets stored or is relevant, and more. What happens, from this point of view, when a new “book” comes out: “The Autobiography of a network-connected lawn”?

On top of that there is software and authorship.

An Algorithmic Autobiography is written by all this different types of (multivocal, human/not human) authors as well as by the GhostWriter:



GhostWriter, people reading the algorithmic autobiography

an actual algorithm. This lead us to the controversial realm of robo-ethics:

- Who is responsible (even legally) for our algorithmic autobiography? The software who writes it, us or both?
- What tools do we have (or we can design) to discern responsibilities, attributions, implications, boundaries and their progressive mutations? And: do we want to design them?
- Is a sort of “contract” needed between us and the GhostWriter ? If yes, what does it look like?

### Questions of time: a continuous present

Our brain is not designed to store or remember everything. It is quite the opposite: we carefully select the memories we need and we want; we choose what to remember and what to forget, in complex ways; we craft our memory and we decide what is public, private, intimate, what to show or not to show in an autobiography. We need to forget and we have the right to be forgotten (or do we?). Algorithmic Autobiography describes a

continuous present in which we potentially access all our memories, all at the same time, constantly, and in which the algorithm selects them and passes them to us.

A hint of this is represented by the “Facebook memories”, which are periodically brought to our attention by the popular social network. They are an everyday, consistent example of this kind of process: what happens when I get my daily “Facebook Memory” which sadly corresponds to a painful remembrance which I really didn’t want to remember; so painful that I commit suicide after seeing it? Who is responsible? Did Facebook kill me? Could an algorithm be designed to kill me in this way? Do we need a contract for this? Can I do legal action? And so on. This type of issue and the model which it describes, brings up infinite critical questions. This is of course problematic.

- Are we able to bear this as human beings?
- What are the risks of being exposed to our and others’ memories, constantly?



Stakhanov, view from the installation at transmediale

- How does this affect our relation to time? To the perception of our past and possible futures?
- What about the right to be forgotten, both from the legal and existential point of view?

How does a society get ready for this type of change? (since we don't really seem ready yet)

### **Privacy, data ownership and possible balance: Ubiquitous Commons and Algorithmic Autobiography**

We have described GhostWriter as a “total invasion of privacy”. This is mostly because until now our relation to the data we produce is mediated by operators and platforms which own our data, because the algorithms are opaque to us, and because we don't know what data is harvested from us, how it is processed and how it is used. On top of that we don't really have any possibility to express and enforce how we'd wish this data to be captured, processed and used. Using the metaphor of the “ubiquitous diary”: not only at the moment it is invisible to us; we don't really own it and we largely don't know we are writing it, who will be able to read it and for what purpose. In our practice, we confront with these kind of issues through the Ubiquitous Commons (Iaconesi, Persico, 2014) project. Ubiquitous

Commons is a research project which tries to confront the current scenario by creating a technological, legal and cultural protocol/toolkit. The starting point of the research is the creation of a p2p infrastructure in which people can describe identities and relations among identities, creating high quality relational environments in which to express how data is used, to be able to technologically, legally and collaboratively enforce these expressions, by using the protocol/toolkit.

There are a number of projects trying to confront with these issues, each in its own ways and with its own philosophies, but we will refer here to the Ubiquitous Commons, because we're familiar with it, and because we believe in its approach:

- Is it possible to apply Ubiquitous Commons in the context of the Algorithmic Autobiography?
- With what results?

This are all questions we want to explore in the near future. can be detected in the activity of the artist who is pressured to propose new practices.

■ SALVATORE IACONESI, ORIANA PERSICO

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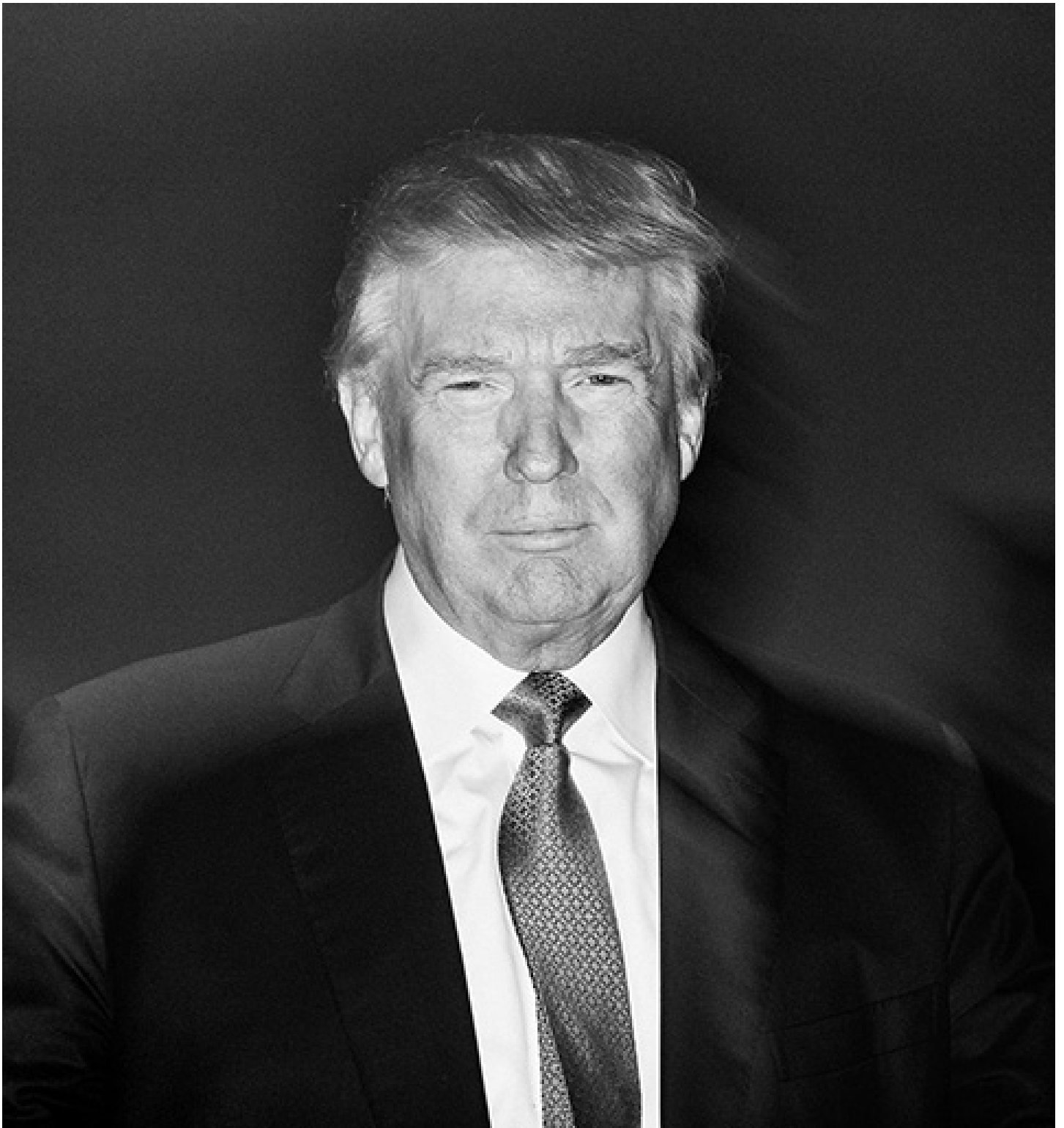


Stakhanov, view from the installation at transmediale

## SALVATORE IACONESI, ORIANA PERSICO

SALVATORE IACONESI IS AN INTERACTION DESIGNER, ROBOTICS ENGINEER, ARTIST, HACKER. TED FELLOW 2012, EISENHOWER FELLOW SINCE 2013 AND YALE WORLD FELLOW 2014. HE TEACHES NEAR FUTURE DESIGN AND MULTI PLATFORM DIGITAL DESIGN AT ISIA DESIGN FLORENCE AND, IN THE PAST, AT "LA SAPIENZA" UNIVERSITY OF ROME, AT THE ROME UNIVERSITY OF FINE ARTS AND AT THE IED DESIGN INSTITUTE. SALVATORE HAS FOUNDED AOS IN 2004, IS PRESIDENT AT HER (PREVIOUSLY HE), AND CO-FOUNDER AT NE-FULA. HIS FOCUS IS AT THE INTERSECTION OF ARTS, DESIGN, TECHNOLOGIES, SCIENCES AND BUSINESS. HE CREATES PROJECTS THAT ARE AT THE SAME TIME ARTWORKS, SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH AND BUSINESS MODELS, ADDRESSING FUNDAMENTAL ISSUES IN CULTURE, INCLUSION, HUMAN RIGHTS, ECONOMY AND ACCESS TO KNOWLEDGE AND EDUCATION.

ORIANA PERSICO HOLDS A DEGREE IN COMMUNICATION SCIENCES, IS AN EXPERT IN PARTICIPATORY POLICIES AND DIGITAL INCLUSION. SHE IS AN ARTIST AND WRITER. SHE HAS WORKED TOGETHER WITH NATIONAL GOVERNMENTS AND THE EUROPEAN UNION TO THE CREATION OF BEST PRACTICES, STANDARDS AND RESEARCHES IN THE AREAS OF DIGITAL RIGHTS, SOCIAL AND TECHNOLOGICAL INNOVATION, DIGITAL BUSINESS ECOSYSTEMS (DBE), PRACTICES FOR PARTICIPATION AND KNOWLEDGE SHARING. ORIANA WRITES CRITICAL, SCIENTIFIC, PHILOSOPHICAL AND POETICAL TEXTS THAT CONNECTS TO TECHNOLOGICAL INNOVATION, AND ON ITS CULTURAL, SOCIOLOGICAL, ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL IMPACTS. SHE IS AN EXPERT ON THE FORMAL ANALYSIS OF CULTURAL AND SOCIAL TRENDS, WITH SPECIFIC FOCUS ON SOCIAL NETWORKS. SHE CREATES BREAKTHROUGH COMMUNICATION CAMPAIGNS, PERFORMANCES, RESEARCH METHODOLOGIES AND STRATEGIES.



The TRUMPological Phantom, Washington Post

# XTREME TRUMPOLOGY

by Randall Packer



## The TRUMP Show

August 8, 2015 @ 9:30 am

Life in America • Performance is Reality • The Post Reality

If there were any doubt that American politics has become a SHOW, we have reached the cathartic denouement and well beyond. Donald Trump has single handedly whipped the Republican campaign into his very own reality tv show, with all the mock self-reflection, confessionals, and personal lambasting we associate with, say, *The Housewives of New Jersey*, just to name an example.

Donald TRUMP is a SHOWMAN, and anyone who takes his bluster seriously doesn't understand that this is pure entertainment for the "ignorant masses," the same audience that thrives on reality television. The problem is that when the ignorant rise up and give voice to their claim on power, Donald Trump will become our next President. When the reality tv audience reaches critical mass and elects their own leader we will once and for all enter into the era of the post reality: a world of total SHOW, 24/7, non-stop: no longer any differentiation between the real and the imaginary.

The low slung nasty insults are all part of the SHOW. Whatever pretense or even suspension of disbelief the American president is required to convey to project himself as a sober leader with great reserve and a gentle but firm hand on the reigns of power, is simply, not in the TRUMP script. The Donald is a fearless woman hating racist (like many in the GOP base), who can bully his way through a political campaign to become a true Presidential mogul cutting sleazy deals with Big Business and annihilating enemies. Perhaps,



The Fantastically Oversized Id, New York Times

this merciless approach to governing has become the American way and Trump just speaks the truth?

Donald Trump is carefully laying the groundwork for the post reality. He is masterfully injecting the artificiality of television entertainment into the bright lights of American politics. Of course, he is not the first to do this, his predecessors include Pat Paulsen (for those who remember), Ronald Reagan, Ross Perot, Stephen Colbert, and even Bill Clinton. But Trump has repackaged his ferocious business acumen laced with reality television flair to raise the stakes on politics as all SHOW. For now, all I can say is enjoy the SHOW, for it may be the end of politics as we know it, and the beginning of a four-year series of made-for-tv episodes brought to you by TRUMP, Inc.

### Nothing is Real

March 1, 2016 @ 1:25 pm

Flow of Information • Fundamentalism • Hell • Life in America • The In-between • The Mysterious & Unknown • The Post Reality • Transmission • Underworld

It's Super Tuesday in America and we find ourselves receding into a dark night. Nothing is Real. All around us the clowns and jesters and zealots of American politics annihilate the code of reason of truth & sensibility. The loudest, nastiest, crudest voices prevail. Nothing is Real. The ever-present transmission signal of the media only serves to amplify the politic voices into a cacophony of the absurd: a noise that sucks out the air and drowns everything else until a deafening silence, an exploding Nothingness, a vast wasteland, fills the void. Downward goes the spiral of confusion until we find ourselves swirling in the dizzy overabundance of disinformation, all of which cancels itself out to  $\emptyset$ . Out of the darkness, leading the procession, the strangely horrifying, TRUMPological phantom encircles and strangles our collective consciousness, leading us swiftly and directly to the Gates of Hell. With the electoral onslaught of Super Tuesday in America, a super-saturated din of candidates and pundits argue themselves into an eternal blast of heat and noise, which underscores the fantastically grotesque nature of our journey into this political underworld.







Donald TRUMP is a SHOWMAN, photo by Mark Wilson / Getty Images

Nothing is Real. Out of the churning torrent of chattering – an endless feedback loop of polarization – the voices of the wailing masses rise up in a great, resounding clamor to cast their vote for the Celebrity Joker: sealing the Deal with the Devil.

From across the depths of this Dantesque drama, I also see Alice (from another Wonderland) descending into a mad world where in her fall, she transgresses mysteriously and unknowingly through to the Other Side, where: the Mad Hatter Himself is hosting the Tea Party... yes, Nothing is Real. We find ourselves descending into worlds of collective social hallucination, narrated by the media chatter resonating through the cavity of our aggregated minds, stretched silly in our futile effort to absorb and compute the message. Our concentration soon breaks down when confronted with the  $\emptyset$ -sum meaninglessness of it all: it's simply impossible to compute. Nothing is Real. Deeper and still deeper into the super-darkness we go, drifting through a timeless, drifting broadcast where the machinations of the politic clarion resound more and more hollow, a profound and disturbing hollowness, until our heads become lighter, floating like air, until Nothing, absolutely Nothing, makes any sense at all. Nothing is Real. Each of us together in the Nothing, a stillness that is chilling, a Nothing that is in between Nowhere.

## Living in a Make Believe World

March 26, 2016 @ 1:08 am

Elements of Seduction • I am the Movie • Intoxicating Embrace • Life in America • Performance is Reality • Situational Comedy • The Post Reality

[Television] finally blurred the line between truth, reality, and mythology, mixed it all up so we got confused and we can't figure out what's real anymore... It might just be that ultimately television is so powerful, so influential, and so addictive, that we can never find the truth. – Barry Levinson, *Poliwood*

Like the great filmmaker Barry Levinson, as a kid I too grew up with a television set in my house beaming in the daily dosage of sitcoms and fantasy suburban portraits of America. And like Levinson, I am in full agreement: television is a powerful entertainment medium, “yet at the same time it may be the most disastrous invention that ever happened in the history of mankind,” as Levinson points out.

For the past several years, I have been writing about the demise of truth in the post real, post television age, in which the Net has evolved into a “total medium” – ubiquitous, instantaneous, interactive, super-participatory, and all-consuming – far beyond the possibilities of television. The Net



TRUMP Descending an Escalator, ABC News

has only deepened the muddy waters of our televised grip on reality, according to Levinson, “to such a degree that we are lost and will never find the truth.”

Levinson’s documentary *Poliwood* exposes the extent to which the 2008 political operatives and their candidates in both political parties manipulated public perception through techniques of made-for-television theatrics, particularly Obama’s Greek, columned stage set for his stadium acceptance speech in Denver at the Democratic National Convention. However, 2008 pales in comparison to what we are seeing today in 2016. Donald TRUMP didn’t need a makeover, he was already a media fabrication to begin with, a tabloid character and star of his own reality television show. His epic descent down the escalator of TRUMP Tower in Manhattan set the stage for what was to come: an unceasing torrent of image-making and blatant propaganda magnified through the totalized medium of television and the Net. TRUMP is America’s first social media super-participant candidate personally distributing and redirecting disinformation to millions of followers via Twitter.

The transition from from TRUMP’s hit reality tv show, “The Apprentice,” to the first serial episode of his presidential campaign, “TRUMP Descending an Escalator,” was seamless, dramatic, seductive, and devoid of any pre-

tense of the real. Performed in the ultimate reality theater of the TRUMP Tower (where “The Appreciate” was filmed), the gliding portrait of Donald and Melania posing for the descent was a mastery of heightened telegenic staging that transcends anything we have ever seen in the history of politics and television. What the TRUMP followers have lost in their immersion in the 24/7 daily diet of the TRUMP Show, is the ability to grasp the real and separate the flow of theatrical hyperbole from the reality of running the government. What we have witnessed, shockingly, is the birth of a new reality television show, “Make America Great Again,” that the public will continue to binge watch through the summer conventions and into the general election. And just possibly, much to our horror, the next installment of episodes of the TRUMP Show will be televised and tweeted directly from the Oval Office at the White House. I am not talking about another season of “The West Wing,” which we all acknowledge was fictional entertainment, rather, this is a new reality television show produced by TRUMP himself (let’s call it “Celebrity President”), which will give the appearance of being all too real as President TRUMP wields the levers of power. Barry Levinson perfectly articulated in 2008 what we now face in 2016, “This is the accepted reality that we live in today... all this is make-believe... and we live in this make-believe world.”



## How to Embrace XTreme TRUMPology

September 3, 2016 @ 2:31 pm

Alchemical Transformation • Effects of Media • Elements of Seduction • Intoxicating Embrace • Performance is Reality

Imagine the World of TRUMP, where reality has been cast aside, where ALL THE WORLD is a stage, where America is the stage set for a reality tv show, where the White House glitters gold. Let's envision this World of TRUMP, where XTreme TRUMPology reigns supreme, let's see just exactly what it takes to embrace XTreme TRUMPology.

First, you need to accept the surreality of XTreme TRUMPology and its 24/7 suspension of disbelief impervious to all standard systems of logic and reason. But, in order to fully embrace XTreme TRUMPology you must become it, embody it, amplify it. You must get INSIDE of its extreme nature and release it from within.

So then XTreme TRUMPology is nothing less than the act of BECOMING TRUMP in the most extravagant way, to be pure TRUMP, to be HYPER-TRUMP, in order to fully embody TRUMPology in its most extreme form.

When TRUMP takes to the airwaves to perform his personification of a politician, you must become an open and willing vessel ready to receive and ingest his message, no matter how unthinkable and unattainable. You must learn to ride the TRUMP wave as he speaks deftly in a multitude of tongues, rapidly shifting, meandering in all directions, saying everything and nothing. The transmission of TRUMP-



TRUMP Descending an Escalator, ABC News

Pology as it emanates from TRUMP himself is Noise entering into the System. It is your job, as a receptacle of the message of TRUMP, to be a Host for the Noise, a willing carrier of the transmission, so that TRUMPology in its purest form can burrow its way into your consciousness and explode in your senses.

You must enter deeply into the FLOW of TRUMP to be a surrogate for XTreme TRUMPology, you must fully immerse yourself in the FLOW in all its immense deception and entertainment. You must open up the Media Tap, wide open for ingestion, swimming along the stream of disinformation to absorb its meaning and ignore the danger of any confusion to your perception of reality. It is necessary to consume a healthy dose of TRUMPology in order to fully experience its erratic message, its abrupt jolt to the nervous system, the surprising juxtaposition of ALL THINGS SIMULTANEOUSLY, to embrace XTreme TRUMPology as your new (post) reality.

Now you are ready for XTreme TRUMPology to grab hold of your en-

tire being: a superbly powerful reality cocktail consisting of the perfect mix of celebrity culture, post-apocalyptic disaster, and made-for-tv drama. Once TRUMPology is circulating freely through your bloodstream, you can Believe, Truly Believe, in its powers of seduction and desire that alchemically transform your mind into a single Collective Mind of cathartic Rage against the System.

## The FULL ON Grip of the Media Torrent

November 3, 2016 @ 10:23 am

Effects of Media • Elements of Seduction • Flow of Information • Media Ingestion • Media Transformation • Situational Comedy • Torrent

Here in the underground studio bunker, I am busy as always, actively monitoring and transforming the incessant flow of the media torrent. This has been my purpose, my *raison d'être*, for the past six years (more like 30 if you count everything). But never before this moment, with the overabundance of XTreme TRUMPology saturating our mediated reality, have I seen or experienced the FULL ON grip of the media torrent. Unless you







Full On Grip of the Media Torrent, Randall Packer

have decided to seal yourself in an anechoic chamber, or maybe you have your own underground bunker impenetrable to the FLOW, you are witnessing a media assault like none other, which most assuredly is wreaking permanent damage on the American psyche.

This, my friends, is what TRUMP had in mind all along. Not just to blow up the government, but to blow up our minds. It's difficult to say whether there was any kind of strategic planning behind his stranglehold on the media. But in essence, like holding a mirror to the sun, he has redirected the media's hot bright lights as a massive assault on the body politic, starved for drama and entertainment. Instinctively, with a kind of ferocious, primal desire to unleash the forces of the media torrent, he has released the valve that heretofore has never been opened quite this wide. We the People are now so tightly wound up in the episodic unfolding of this situational tragi-comedy, that we find ourselves seductively glued to a political reality show that is simply impossible not to watch: the polls, pundits, surrogates, ads, speeches, anger, and the bias of thrashing, clashing, spasmodic ideology. The nation is exhausted and spent with five days yet to go to the election.

During the final stretch of this epic horror show of a political campaign, I am, as an artist of the post reality, ingesting

the torrent, systems ON, analyzing the contents, tracking the energy, recording the hyperacusic noise, to present to you a cooked slice of our media diet.

Open up wide.

Truth is Stranger Than Fiction

November 12, 2016 @ 12:03 pm

Effects of Media • Elements of Seduction • I am the Movie • Intoxicating Embrace • Performance is Reality • The Post Reality

President TRUMP. Get used to it, there is no turning back. The reality of TRUMP as president of the United States has shocked the country, and the world, because no matter how hard we tried, we could never have imagined it. So yes, truth is stranger than fiction, and the fact is, we must now prepare for a TRUMP presidency.

How did this horrific reality come to be? It's simple: the unscripted post-truth power of reality television. The enactment of the so-called "real life," is, in our present day reality, entertainment culture, more compelling, richer in dramatic conflict, yes stranger, than anything we might imagine. In the staging of an unscripted situation, the dynamic forces of human behavior unencumbered by pre-





Truth is Stranger than Fiction, photo by Kevin Lamarque/Reuters

scribed lines and pre-determined actions are calculated to engage in ways that are far more compelling than fictional scenarios. For the vast audiences starved for the thrill of reality-based entertainment, TRUMP is their man.

Last year, when I began writing about TRUMP, I could see that he was bringing the reality format to the political campaign, and that his techniques of performance would easily win over the very same audiences who followed “The Apprentice.” His followers saw “Make America Great Again” as the sequel, with the star of the show seamlessly segueing from the Board Room to the Political Stage. TRUMP masterfully used the reality format to excite and transform his television audience into a voting electorate. He used the very same methodology of branding, determining exactly what people wanted to see, want they wanted to hear, targeting their anger, frustrations, and prejudices. TRUMP wielded unscripted reality tv hot buttons that were inflammatory and controversial to stir up the basest emotions, such as: “I Will Build a Great Wall,” “They’re Rapists,” “I Like People Who Weren’t Captured,” “There was Blood Coming Out of her Whatever,” “Obama was the Founder of ISIS,” “My Whole Life is About Winning,” “Our Politicians Are Stupid,” “I Know More about ISIS than the Generals,” etc, etc. This torrent of insults and boasting was precisely intended to seize the imagination of the forgotten man.

A political strategist would never dare script any of this for a political candidate. But on the TRUMP campaign trail of cheap thrills, his improvisation was masterfully crafted in the moment based on a deep understanding of the entertainment value of outrageous statements. The effect was mesmerizing, engaging, seductive, and highly manipulative for the base of angry, white working class voters who totally ate it up, as well as the media that captured his every move.

Yes, truth is stranger than fiction, particularly when politicians go uncontrollably rogue, fully in the moment. You could see this at the rallies, especially the early ones, when TRUMP would perform his speeches as a nightclub act, a sort of George Carlin of the alt-right, making it up on the spot, gauging the re-

sponse, refining the lines, and stirring heated anger with promises of revolution and anti-global, Brexit-infused, nationalist superiority. By reducing the audience emotionally to the most crass, disgusting, and vile impulses of hate, TRUMP pulled on the same unscripted strings that are at the heart and soul of reality television.

But in the end, this form of “authenticity” was nothing more than entertainment, or let us say “simulated authenticity,” which is nothing but a lie, because there is not a word of sincerity in any of it. While spontaneous, it is also calculated, just like highly-produced reality television such as “The Apprentice.” Donald TRUMP as a political candidate constructed himself as an avatar for the individual cravings of people seeking an outlet for their anger, frustrations, and isolation. TRUMP gave it to them through a loud appeal to the bizarre combination of change and celebrity. In doing so, he triggered the darkest emotions of hatred, racism, sexism, and intolerance. His call for political revolution, unlike Bernie Sanders, triggered a dangerous mob-mentality deepening the divide that now threatens the very core of American values and democracy with his ascent to the presidency.

No one could have predicted the epic nature of “Make America Great Again.” But in our culture of celebrity, with the blurring of reality and entertainment, perhaps we can now say that truth has died, we have entered the era of post-truth, the spectrum between the real and the imaginary has dissolved. There is no longer truth when it has been consumed by fabrication, lies, fake news, and manipulation. TRUMP has ushered in a world we can no longer believe in,





Through the Lens, photo by Damon Winter/New York Times

a post-truth world that is a whole lot stranger than fiction.

### The Death of Reality

November 25, 2016 @ 7:53 pm

Effects of Media • Elements of Seduction • Flow of Information • Intoxicating Embrace • Life in America • Performance is Reality • The Post Reality • Transmission

We now see clearly through the lens of the television camera: the public execution of reality. When the camera's frame becomes a window revealing the sharp distortion of our perception, when the world around us transforms before us fabricated in the dark fantasy of pervasive propaganda and disinformation, we are witness to the sudden death of reality. Yes, the unimaginable can happen, it is happening, it is unfolding right in front of our eyes as the absolute mediation of everyday life. A SHOW. When politics become pop-culture-driven-entertainment, a

made-for-television production for our viewing pleasure, the leakage of the suspension of disbelief emanating from the screen and out into the world, the Spectacle grabs hold of us and consumes our consciousness in the seductive and menacing glory of the television transmission.

When you no longer differentiate between serial episodes of reality television and the hyperdrama of a government-in-transition, when politicians glide in and out of gilded elevators to make their way up, up, up to the Master of the Universe in the great TRUMP Tower fortress, then you have realized nothing less than the death of reality.

And when "the deplorables," formerly known as "the people," those who herald from the great expanse of Middle America have once and for all succumbed to the manipulative, stage-crafted, media-driven Spectacle

of "Make America Great Again," who now joyously shout to the heavens that a golden star has descended upon 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue to save the world, yes, beyond the shadow of a doubt, reality in America has expired once and for all.

And as TRUMP has ushered in the death blow to reality, we now enter, unequivocally, the post reality. Just in case you haven't heard, in the post reality there is no longer separation between that which is real and that which is not. In the post reality, the real and the imaginary, fact and fiction, truth and lies, the hot lights of the camera and the sun that shines down from the sky, all blur unceremoniously into a sinister anti-reality, a terrifying, empty void that resides at the center of the lens where nothing, absolutely nothing is real.

To give credit where credit is due, we must lay blame not just on TRUMP,



but on The Media as the Great Enabler for the erosion of truth that has shattered the foundation of our fragile democracy. By capturing TRUMP in the omnipresent eye of the lens, situating Him at the core of everyone's attention, they empowered him, enriched and enlarged him, provided a platform for TRUMP to burrow his way into the nation's consciousness, inside our collective brain, seducing enough poor hypnotized working class souls to amass the electoral votes to become the 45th President of the United States. Yes, dear Media, we point the finger at YOU.

We look back at the sordid history of demagoguery to realize that all it takes is for a single, charismatic, telegenic politician aka reality tv star/billionaire cum celebrity tabloid figure to grab hold the reigns of The Media Machine through its lust for ratings, and focus the spotlight with all its might on Himself as the Savior of The People. You then have nothing less than a coup d'état-by-hyperbole, in which the moral foundation of political leadership is thrown out the window, the anachronistic rules of engagement replaced by a blinding diversion from the issues to stoke the flames of social turmoil. Hence, the stripping away of all reason, the corrosion of logic, until nothing remains of The People's grip on reality but a raw, feverish devotion.

### The Exploding Perpetual Motion Media Machine

December 15, 2016 @ 12:05 pm

Effects of Media • Elements of Seduction • Flow of Information • Speed of Life

TRUMP Tower extends high in the Manhattan skyline, a radioactive transmitter broadcasting and redirect-



TRUMP Tower, Photo by Randall Packer

ing an unceasing torrent of incoming and outgoing signals instantaneously and simultaneously, with lethal effect. This is the fulcrum, ground-zero, and the mis-en-scene for the 24/7 chatter of deafening noise that is circulating the globe faster and faster and faster, reaching such a terrifying speed that it threatens a world neurological meltdown. TRUMP has control of all the channels, like a spoiled child who has grabbed the remote, aiming it sporadically, impulsively, and dangerously in every direction at everyone and no one.

From his über throne high up in the Tower, TRUMP effortlessly and mindlessly taps a few keys on his phone, sends a random missive out on Twitter to his 17.3 million followers; which is then retweeted, liked and tagged tens of thousands of times; commented live on all the cable news channels; tweeted again and fed back into the news transmission; then written up in dozens of news articles, blogs, and online opinion pages; hacked and recirculated on Facebook by the fake news world; then retweeted and reposted again as an appropriated, regenerated, twisted

version of its original; until the whole jumble returns to the Tower and is commented on by the Presidential Transition Team; only to be recirculated back out to social media and the cable news broadcasts, and on and on and on ad infinitum in one infinitely echoing feedback trail of exploding disinformation and loss of the real: The Exploding Perpetual Motion Media Machine.

The world will not end because of nuclear holocaust, nor an asteroid collision with earth, nor even the implosion of the earth's climate, no, we are all going to sizzle and drown in the hot circulation of our media. The great accomplishments of modern information science over the past half-century, ushered in by a storied lineage of visionary scientists, those great men who saw human culture realizing its most far-flung ambitions in the augmentation of human intellect through a collaborative system of information sharing – can no longer save us from the lunacy of our own demise.

With a celebrity demagogue at the Control Tower of the world's media flow, the best laid plans of our global



Make Everything Great Again, photo by Petras Malukas/AFP/Getty Images

information culture has been hijacked. TRUMP is now commander-in-chief of super-participatory media assault weaponry designed to blast overwhelming torrents of propaganda at the speed of light. Even his rallies were a calculated performance of outrageous perfection intended to do nothing more than keep the live red light on in the unblinking eye of the television cameras: insuring that every word, flourish, and insult was broadcasted to every home, seared deep and irrevocably into the collective brain.

Is there a way to end this madness, you might ask? Or has TRUMP triumphantly morphed himself into a media-savvy Antichrist who wields a smart phone to direct fire coming down from heaven to earth. You do not have to go far back in history to see what happens when politicians are hell-bent on controlling the news. But never before was the control of information so immediate, so direct, so

forceful, so punishing to democracy. The problem is that we are all complicit, all of us, riveted to the broadcast, seduced by the transmission, hypnotized by the Spectacle: all of us, willing participants in the TRUMP Show.

The only cure is to STOP WATCHING.

#### Requiem for Truth

January 14, 2017 @ 11:45 am

Effects of Media • Elements of Seduction • Flow of Information • I of the Storm • Intoxicating Embrace • Life in America • Media Ingestion • Nation's Capital • Performance is Reality

In a world swirling with threats, from climate change to nuclear armageddon to terrorism, there is no doubt that the greatest threat of all, with the looming TRUMP presidency, is the annihilation of truth. Throughout the 2016 Presidential Campaign came an

implosion of disinformation, propagated by a candidate with absolutely no regard for facts, a candidate who scripted his "Make America Great Again" pseudo-campaign as a new chapter in an unfolding reality serial drama. TRUMP's rise to power was ALL SHOW, a total performance, a sleight-of-hand, and a masterful execution of the suspension of disbelief, which (in part) secured the election by hypnotizing and seducing the forlorn and the forgotten. And now we prepare ourselves, just six days before INAUGURATION DAY, for a somber gathering on the National Mall as TRUMP leads a Requiem Mass for truth.

Even before taking the oath of office, he has reshuffled the deck of reason. There are so many scandals and controversies at play, that the media has been buried in an avalanche of disinformation. Did the Russian email hack sway the election? Does Putin have a





Media Weapon of Disinformation, New York Times

compromise file on TRUMP ready for blackmail? Is FBI director James Comey a Russian operative? The list goes on. Any one of these scandals alone would threaten our democracy, but the sum total has resulted in a three-ring media circus, in which the circus master's rising swamp runneth over.

Are we at all surprised that the SHOWMAN is putting on The SHOW for the Ages? From the daily Tweets denigrating anyone who dares attack him, to the bullying press conferences declaring all anti-TRUMP sentiment as fake news, to the robotic staff surrogates who defend TRUMP's childish outbursts with half-baked, twisted logic, we clearly see the method behind the madness: an absolute war on truth. And yet, despite the fact we have a global telematic information system instantaneously at our fingertips, in which every fiction and false utterance can be potentially disproved, TRUMP's torrent of disinformation is so effusive, so volatile, so overwhelming, we are literally drowning in confusion between fact and fiction, between the real and the imaginary. When the line erodes

between truth and disinformation, we have nothing left. We no longer have democracy.

As we prepare ourselves for this Friday's Inauguration, let us take a moment to reflect on how we arrived at this horrifying juncture in the American story. We could have easily seen it coming: our obsession with pop culture, the cult of celebrity, the relentless media torrent, the total embrace of Now and the impatient hunger for real-time information, the seduction of conspiracy and the obsession for scandal, et al, et al. All have conjoined in a perfect media storm with TRUMP as ringleader, scrambling our neurons, replacing reason with 24/7 infotainment.

TRUMP now rides into office amidst a hurricane of disorientation. Whether for or against, it no longer matters, we are all part of the SHOW, a cast of citizens who are about to see the door slammed in our faces in this epic theatrical staging of a coup d'truth.

**We Must Now Become a Media Weapon of Disinformation**  
January 16, 2017 @ 4:54 pm

## Activism • Effects of Media • Elements of Seduction • The Post Reality

Heaven help us: the world is spinning and imploding at the speed of light. We thought the post-9/11, Bush-Cheney, Season in Hell of disinformation & eternal war & economic apocalypse would be our demise. But oh no, we somehow managed to pull back from the edge of the abyss without a moment to spare.

Resistance against TRUMP and all that he stands for requires new methods that will collapse the seductive appeal to those who have become hypnotized by his SHOWmanship. We are no longer living in the 1960s, which God help us, seems an age of innocence in contrast to today: long before the personal computer, the Internet, the cell phone, and social media. The media of yesterday was radio and television, and the activists who gathered from Berkeley to Washington understood how to capture the attention of the camera and use it to their advantage. But now the medium of television has morphed into something entirely new: the broadcast is no longer confined to the tv screen, but rather, information streams pervasively on our laptops, smart phones, tablets, and social media feeds. There is no escape from the media torrent.

Yesterday's media was a one-to-many form of broadcasting, controlled by a few mega-networks who beamed their reports into our living rooms each evening with the nightly news we all trusted. Today's media is ubiquitous and 24/7 and partisan, a vast mediascape across countless cable channels, blogs, and news feeds. And through social media, we now all have our own channel of media distribu-



tion that instantaneously transmits our every thought to global networks of friends and followers. While network and cable television continue to manufacture and churn out the news, there is an alternate universe of media outlets that distributes control, which in many ways flattens the hierarchy of information traveling across the communications landscape, and TRUMP has mastered and overpowered this new landscape.

TRUMP has become his own NBC, except bigger, with more followers than the most popular cable network shows. His voice booms out from his smart phone at all hours of the day and night to an audience of over 20 million. His followers, who seem to have nothing better to do than comment on his Tweets, retweet each and every missive in a viral explosion that reverberates resoundly throughout the social media universe.

So, I ask, what to do, given the state of today's mediaspace? What we now need to do is counter the effects by taking control of the Media Weapon of Disinformation. It is the only solution. We must take up arms and signal a call-to-action by engaging the power of the network and techniques of disinformation. We must grab hold of our own media channel to resist through the activation of the mechanisms of disinformation, engaging in fakery, and satire, spreading our words and actions far and wide and everywhere all at once through acts of socially mediated super-participation. We must master the same techniques of propaganda that have served TRUMP (and Bush-Cheney) so well. We must cut through the ubiquitous noise of mass media by generating a counter-offensive of our own.

We must fight disinformation with an even greater avalanche of disinformation to protect ourselves from the onslaught of the media storm that TRUMP has unleashed. There are many ways to accomplish this. If you have the inclination, you can broadcast live from the streets, rant on Facebook, author a political blog, write an e-book, or open a radical online shop of political propaganda. Most of all, you cannot be silent!

We cannot let TRUMP's rise to power get us down, this is not a moment for defeat, it is our finest hour of inspiration and the ideal time to realize projects that were heretofore impossible and unimaginable! Now is when we need to deploy the network to challenge XTreme TRUMPological disorientation. Or in the words of media artist Mike Stubbs, we need to instigate "politically inspired trickery and deception designed to exploit the shifting boundaries between fiction and reality in a world of post-truth politics."

Yes we can!!

■ RANDALL PACKER

## RANDALL PACKER

RANDALL PACKER IS A MULTIMEDIA ARTIST, COMPOSER, WRITER AND EDUCATOR, AND HAS WORKED AT THE INTERSECTION OF INTERACTIVE MEDIA, LIVE PERFORMANCE, AND NETWORKED ART SINCE THE 1980S. HE HAS RECEIVED CRITICAL ACCLAIM FOR HIS SOCIALLY AND POLITICALLY INFUSED CRITIQUE OF AN INCREASINGLY TECHNOLOGICAL SOCIETY, AND HAS PERFORMED AND EXHIBITED AT MUSEUMS, THEATERS, AND FESTIVALS INTERNATIONALLY. HE HAS ALSO WRITTEN EXTENSIVELY ON ART, TECHNOLOGY, SOCIETY AND CULTURE FOR PUBLICATIONS INCLUDING: MIT PRESS, JOHNS HOPKINS UNIVERSITY PRESS, THE LEONARDO JOURNAL FOR THE ARTS & SCIENCES, LINK, ART LIES, HYPERALLERGIC, AND CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS. DR. PACKER HOLDS AN MFA AND PHD IN MUSIC COMPOSITION AND HAS TAUGHT MULTIMEDIA AT THE UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, BERKELEY, MARYLAND INSTITUTE COLLEGE OF ART, AMERICAN UNIVERSITY, CALIFORNIA INSTITUTE OF THE ARTS, JOHNS HOPKINS UNIVERSITY, AND THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART. HE IS CURRENTLY A VISITING ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR AT THE SCHOOL OF ART, DESIGN & MEDIA AT NANYANG TECHNOLOGICAL UNIVERSITY (NTU) IN SINGAPORE, WHERE HE TEACHES NETWORKED ART PRACTICE. AT NTU, HE DIRECTS THE OPEN SOURCE STUDIO (OSS) PROJECT, AN EDUCATIONAL INITIATIVE EXPLORING COLLABORATIVE ONLINE RESEARCH AND TEACHING IN THE MEDIA ARTS.



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