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SOCIAL AND TECHNOLOGICAL CONTROL IN DIGITAL ART: FROM EXPERIMENTATION TO RADICAL CRITICISM

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A set of very diverse and plural creative practices emerged in the 20th Century together with the evolution and development of technology. These practices are characterised by their high degree of experimentation and fusion of innovative interdisciplinary creative processes. Many of these creations questioned the technological

panopticism that has imposed itself nowadays in all globalised societies.

Social technological control, a recurring issue in the most contemporary media art, is as ancient as the history of humanity. Only its ideological conditionings and its application have varied over time. From the end of the 20th Century, the revolution, both in technology, but also in audiovisual media has brought about changes in its own perception, becoming more subtle and globalised. Unfortunately, as we shall see, we are accepting the unbridled implementation of control and surveillance technology in our daily lives with apparent ease.

The idea of substituting human perception with photographic images helped to identify enemy areas during the First World War. The military industry perfected the technique given its need to avoid any existing source of danger. Having said this, the images that resulted from the substitution of the human eye with a technological eye are seemingly useless, unless accompanied by texts that reveal them and that make them imaginable [1].

The video graphic technology that was available in the 1970s significantly shattered the space-time binomial. Artists such as Dan Graham or Bruce Nauman researched the relation between public and private spheres or between objectivity and subjectivity as technology allows for a relatively simple manipulation of perception by creating temporal imbalances. There was also much experimentation with projections and work on the effectiveness of closed circuit video, where, at times, the observed spectator is actively and consciously involved.

In the 1980s and 1990s, Internet emerges as the greatest technological and communicative panacea of all times. Many works of art anticipate the concept of net art (global connection, broad and free access to the piece) and infringe the principles of ubiquity and participation. Control and surveillance applications developed initially with basic technologies that characterised

themselves in that they focused their attention on the possibilities of exchange that network connections provided, as well as the non-linear and interactive possibilities of hypertext [2].

"The World's First Collaborative Sentence" (1994) by American artist Douglas Davis, with the backing of the Lehman College Art Gallery in New York, was a pioneering piece of net.art [3], which broke artistic moulds regarding the Web. This piece introduced a relevant innovation in the creative panorama: developing collaboratively through the Internet. Gradually introducing, texts, sounds, images and videos into a work in progress that altered crucial concepts such as time, space, authorship and copyrights. Nowadays, viewing this piece presents us with an interesting double reading: on the one hand, it compiles all the contributions received throughout the project's duration, and on the other hand, it presents us with an unusual historical vision of the evolution of the mediums' possibilities.

Interesting experiences developed, that same year, aimed at taking advantage of the Web's artistic potential. Artists from varied backgrounds, but with an innovative streak, developed these experiences, working with basic, and limited technologies. These artists focused their efforts in studying the possibilities that this new medium provided for the exchange and diffusion of works of art. Some of these are still relevant fourteen years down the line. Muntadas, for example, presented the installation "The File Room" in the Randolph Street Gallery in Chicago [4]. In this piece, he examines the vast history of censorship and introduces a new dimension to his work: the participation of visitors both in the exhibition room, and through the Web in a documentary project with clear critical undertones regarding information networks [5]. In this manner, Internet, the instrument created to support the American defence system metamorphoses into a public instrument for information. Control is subverted.

As predicted by Paul Virilio in his article "Speed and Information: Cyberspace Alarm!" (1995), the world is facing twin phenomena: immediacy and instantaneity, which may totally transform its conception.

The big event looming upon the 21st Century in connection with this absolute speed is the invention of a perspective of real time that will supersede the perspective of real space, which in its turn was invented by Italian artists in the Quattrocento [...]

Cyberspace is a new form of perspective. It does not coincide with the audiovisual perspective that we already know. It is a fully new perspective, free of any previous reference: it is a –tactile perspective.

To see at a distance, to hear at a distance: that was the essence of the audiovisual perspective of old. But to reach at a distance, to feel at a distance, that amounts to shifting the perspective towards a domain it did not yet encompass. That of contact, of contact-at-a-distance: tele-contact.[6]

Throughout the 20th Century, the technological surveillance devices that watch over machines and humans became more sophisticated and multiplied throughout the civilised world. They made their presence felt not only, in the workplace but also, crept into public spaces and entertainment venues.

Curiously, we find that within the idea of necessity regarding the use of such surveillance equipment, there is a clear determination to employ the result of the recordings, to create situations where these acquire the desired value or incidence. In the United Kingdom, for example, the James Bulger Case triggered off the generalised use of such technology while extending a positive image of its usage throughout the world.

Alongside these events, the crisis of values induced by the Gulf War, led to an in-depth analysis of the impact of what we now know as the first televised war in History. As Baudrillard declared:

The Iraqis blow-up civilian buildings making people believe in a dirty war. The Americans masquerade satellite news broadcasts for

people to believe in a clean war. It is all about appearances![7]

Whilst some pondered on the concept in itself, others, such as Tomas Ruff participated in Documenta IX (1992) exhibiting a new series, *Nacht* (1992-6), with disquieting urban landscapes of Dusseldorf in the dark, inspired by photographs from the war, taken with night vision cameras.

Cyberspace specifically transformed net.artists, and by association, digital creators, into technological slaves. The alleged total freedom that computers seem to offer has done little more than enslave them by the constant demands to update the medium promoted by the large corporations. Interesting pieces have fallen into oblivion due to the ephemeral nature of a medium that is in constant evolution. Only in some, limited cases, have we detected an interest in preserving them, by updating or cloning them. This occurred with a pioneering piece on surveillance, "Studio Visit" by Cheryl Donegan,[8] which gave rise in 1997 to an entire saga of Web-based Orwellian Big Brothers.

In 2000, German artist Andrea Zapp mused over control from the point of view of daily life, in the "Little Sister"[9] project, defined by the author as, "the first soap opera in the world based on a series of surveillance web cams, which are on-line 24 hours a day". The project questions the proliferation of control systems, and includes a set of 26 video cameras that transmit -real time images of daily life in a German city.

The spectator personalises the narration selecting, with a simple click, the available transmissions from different windows. "Little Sister" combines images from Closed-Circuit Television (CCTV) cameras and web cams. To a certain extent, this perspective privatises parts of the public space, and makes certain scenes of domestic life, public; raising questions as to the limits between both spaces and creating a voyeuristic spectacle based on extracts of daily life.

The 11th of September terrorist attacks in

New York provided us with live footage of the enormous impact that can result from patently fragile security systems. Among the concepts that failed, we can include boundary demarcation, the wall, as well as borders and surveillance instruments. Since then, public opinion, feeding off homogenous defence policies the world over, has been trapped in an alienating state of collective panic. Faced with this situation citizens demand protection from the relevant institutions, this, in turn, leads us to ask ourselves if the State has sufficient (and efficient) systems to do so.

Although our public space is still predominantly civilised, with increasingly homogenous shops and entertainment outlets the world over, our bodies and belongings are incessantly frisked and our past is shamelessly scrutinised by democratic legislation.

At the same time, that physical space is increasingly shielded, virtual space becomes a mousetrap. Governments beg large corporations, such as Google or Yahoo, to release all user data they may have with the dubious goal of preventing cases of paedophilia or terrorism. Companies such as TorrentSpy close down, unable to continue the legal struggle against courts of law that oblige them to handover users' details, in clear violation of its privacy policy. As the founder of Sun Microsystems, Scott McNealy, recently exclaimed, "in the Internet era, you have zero privacy anyway. Get over it!"[10]

Although it may seem paradoxical, surveillance systems on the Web are still fairly primitive. The amount of information that is generated in the Web, have made notorious spying applications such as Echelon, Enfpopol or Carnivore, which are fundamentally automatic content analysis programmes that scour messages in search for key-words, obsolete; due their difficulties in actually understanding contents.

New technological surveillance initiatives are trying to keep up with the times. Whilst Europe develops OSEMINTI, an advanced

Carnivore, the US Department of Homeland Security is working on a programme known as Advise, which aims to create an enormous database on all digital information from corporate sources, the media, commercial transactions and all on-line interaction from any person with public administrations or corporations. The system crosschecks this data with standardised numbers such as Personal Identification Numbers, Social Security Numbers, credit cards, or telephone numbers. The result is an in-depth analysis of each citizen's personal profile, which will allow the system, if it works as expected, to shadow any citizen in a potential risk situation and in total impunity.

The generalised and often unlawful use of video surveillance cameras, scanners, radars or the indiscriminate use of databases is spreading in countries with extended democratic traditions based on the argument of fear. At the same time, digital technologies have been infiltrating the art world, moulding themselves both to creative imperatives as well as those of the market. We are currently living fully within the era of new media art, the era of digital technological convergence. Cameras have consolidated themselves as a metaphor of the spied on society in which we live, therefore we must not be surprised that their contradictory potential has attracted the attention of many artists. Let us take, for example, the work of the Surveillance Camera Players, a group that defines itself as anarchist, created in New York in 1996, which aims, with its actions, to strengthen the right to privacy and to promote the debate on the generalised use of surveillance equipment in democratic societies.

The Surveillance Camera Players consider that the use of video surveillance cameras by police forces constitutes a blatant violation of the Fourth Amendment of the US Constitution, and they manifest themselves against their use. Its members act in front of surveillance cameras, climbing and exhibiting banners in front of their lenses, or publishing maps that reveal the location of various

security systems in different cities. Their activities have extended to other parts of the world, and have been especially visible in certain Central European countries.

Although in an entirely different line of work, we wish to highlight the work of Rafael Lozano-Hemmer [11]. His constant research on the presence, or absence, of citizens in urban landscapes has become a recurrent theme in his work, starting with "Tensión Superficial" (1993-2004)[12]. For many years, he has carried out projects, which he defines as Relational Architecture, in which he alters the reading of urban architecture through technological interventions.

In some of his latest pieces: *Glorias de la Contabilidad* (2004), *Basado en hechos reales* (2004), *Standars y doble standars* (2004), *Público subtulado* (2005) or in *Homografías* (2006) he has connected the spectators-users of these installations with video surveillance systems. In these new works, the piece itself visually assaults the spectators, forcing them to question the arbitrary nature of control applications. The voluntary and even recreational interactivity of his first creations disappears, substituted by an emphasis on the connectivity of the various spectators that are present in the room, and their relation with the piece itself. As we have seen, technological experiments conceived for military purposes have stealthily infiltrated all aspects of daily life by transforming themselves into apparently trivial objects: ATMs, intercom systems, commercial security systems... In order to create a critical conscience regarding control and surveillance, we initially developed two projects in 2007: "Uncovering Ctrl/ Destapando el Ctrl" [13] conceived with the aim of broadening personal research on the relation between these devices and media art. The creative collaborative project "DESTAPA EL CONTROL"[14] aims to promote critical conscience on these issues calling for the observation of daily spaces to uncover these devices and publicise them. We hope that it will become a benchmark space for

participation, criticism and awareness. Always remember. Observe your surroundings. Discover the control instruments that surround you and express your opinion about them, to demonstrate collectively that the real and daily problems of citizens contrast with this absurd trend, embraced by some leaders, to spread fictitious fears instead of working on the issues that really require their attention.

NOTES

- [1] STACHE, Inge, *Crítica de la mirada. Textos de Harun Farocki*, Buenos Aires, Editorial Altamira, 2003.
- [2] The term "hyperlink" was the first denomination given to what are better known as links or hypertext links.
- [3] The World's First Collaborative Sentence: <<http://ca80.lehman.cuny.edu/davis>> [Consulted on: 12/01/2008].
- [4] The File Room: <<http://www.thefileroom.org>> [Consulted on: 20/09/2007].
- [5] MACBA., *On Translation*, Barcelona, ACTAR-MACBA, 2002.
- The File Room was conceived after Muntadas' unfortunate experience with a video that was censored by Spanish State Television (TVE).
- [6] VIRILIO, P. "Velocidad e información. ¡Alarma en el ciberespacio!" (August 1995), *Aleph pensamiento*: <<http://www.aleph-arts.org/pens/speed.html>> [Consulted on: 11/02/2008].
- [7] BAUDRILLARD, Jean. *La guerra del golfo no ha tenido lugar*, Barcelona, Ed. Anagrama, 2001, p.66.
- [8] The artist appropriates and adapts the studio to an idea initiated just one year before by Jennifer Ringley. This student in Pennsylvania installed a series of webcams in her dorm at Dickinson College and connected them to a Web page, JenniCam.org. She broadcast her life 24-hours a day, for seven years, while performing all kinds of daily tasks and activities. Her experiment, transformed into a business

venture, was closed down for reasons that are yet unclear in 2005.

- [9] Little Sister: <<http://www.azapp.de/littlesister>> [Consulted on: 15/02/2008].
- [10] CASTELLS, Manuel. "Internet, libertad vigilada", *El Periódico*, 12 /02 /2006.
- [11] LOZANO-HEMMER, Rafael: <<http://www.lozano-hemmer.com>> [Consulted on: 10/12/2007].
- [12] This is an installation with various interactive modules. Originally designed for a technological play (in 1993), it is currently presented as a human eye in a plasma screen with a camera-tracking device that detects the presence and movements of the spectator in the room.
- [13] UNCOVERING CONTROL (Media art, surveillance and control): <http://uncovering-ctrl.blogspot.com>.
- [14] Proyecto Destapa el control: <http://destapaelcontrol.blogspot.com>.



THE ARTIST AS A GENERATOR OF SWARMINGS: QUESTIONING THE NETWORK SOCIETY

[CARLOS SEDA]

I. PROBLEMATISING WEB 2.0 WHY BARCELONA'S CIVIC ORDINANCE IS A POLITICAL CONSEQUENCE OF THE NETWORK SOCIETY?

Barcelona's civic ordinance branches out into two directions; on the one hand, it manages part of our lives, whereas on the other hand, it represses those practices that it has not foreseen. This is the basis of a war economy: the creation of new contents does not sustain new markets. Anything different to the established norm actually puts things into question, which is tantamount to a terrorist threat. In other terms, for the Barcelona City Council