
WPA PRESENTS

EXPERIMENTAL MEDIA 2013

CYBER IN SECURITIES



AUGUST 30–SEPTEMBER 27, 2013

PEPCO EDISON PLACE GALLERY, 702 8TH STREET, NW, WASHINGTON, DC

EXPERIMENTAL MEDIA 2013

CYBER IN SECURITIES

CURATED BY

Lisa Moren, Professor, Department of Visual Art,
University of Maryland, Baltimore County

ARTISTS

Birgit Bachler, Walter Langelaar, Owen Mundy,
and Tim Schwartz

Channel TWo (CH2): Adam Trowbridge
and Jessica Westbrook, with Jesus Duran

Heather Dewey-Hagborg

Hasan Elahi

The Force of Freedom with Dave Young

Taylor Hokanson

Ricarda McDonald and Donna Szoke

Lexie Mountain

Preemptive Media

David Rokeby

Julia Kim Smith

WhiteFeather

RELATED PROGRAMS

PANEL DISCUSSION

Saturday, September 21, 3pm
at Pepco Edison Place Gallery,
702 8th St. NW, Washington, DC

EXPERIMENTAL MEDIA VIDEO PROGRAM

Juried by Jason Eppink, Associate Curator of Digital Media,
Museum of the Moving Image, New York

NIGHT ONE:

Thursday, September 12, 6:30pm
at The Phillips Collection,
1600 21st St. NW, Washington, DC

NIGHT TWO:

Monday, September 23, 6:30pm
at the Corcoran Gallery of Art
500 17th St. NW, Washington, DC

CURATOR'S ESSAY

BY LISA MOREN

CYBER IN SECURITIES is an exhibition that addresses the growing concern among a cross-generational group of artists who are deeply enthusiastic about new media, but whose enthusiasm is complicated by the suspicion that the good will of their shared digital consciousness is being used against them. One of the material questions in this exhibition concerns the feasibility of locating the experience of an artwork when it is distributed throughout a network. This distributed experience reflects early visions of the Internet as a “knowledge engine”, envisioning a free association of ideas linking all of the sciences, literature, and the arts. Internet pioneers chose a decentralized, non-hierarchical method of communication that offered the potential for creating a shared consciousness to solve the world’s most urgent problems. Meaning in motion became the law of this democratically built network, just as going viral is its natural instinct. Conversely, keeping secrets is the antithesis of a distributed network (as seen in recent media events).

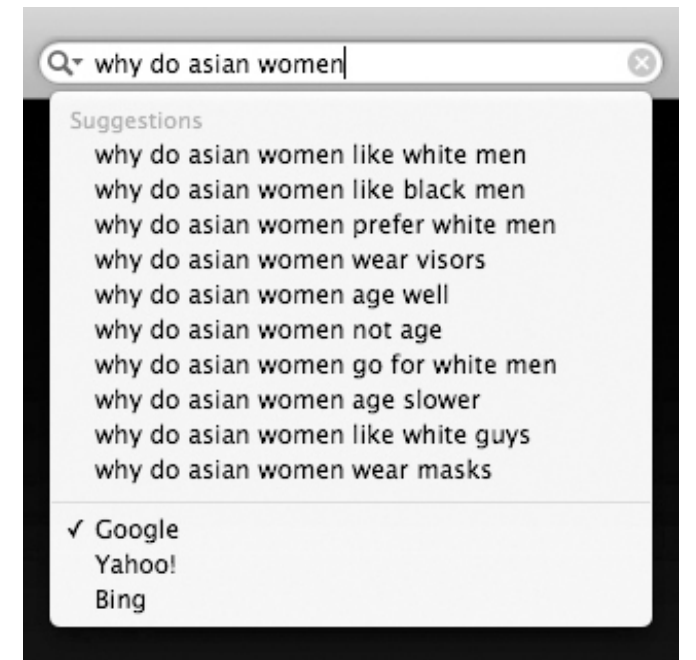
Today, building an interdisciplinary knowledge engine seems quaint in the age of meta-data. Facebook alone collected over 100 petabytes of personal data by 2012 from willing participants (fyi: 1 petabyte is just over 1 million gigabytes).¹ According to experts, the amount of worldwide data totals 2.8 zettabytes (that’s 1 billion petabytes) and anticipated to double by 2015.² This exponentially climbing data-mountain highlights the challenge faced by future historical crumb seekers attempting to define this cultural moment. I Facebook therefore I am?

Artists have responded to this massive data collection and the residual scrutiny of their private lives by creating distributed networks and systems under their own control and rules. Using GPS tracking, data-mining, meta-data, glitch and surveillance aesthetics, augmented reality, algorithms, CCTV, drone lexicons, sensors, DNA surveillance, and reverse-surveillance tactics, artists in this exhibition have responded in a way that questions the location of the art, or the location of ‘truth’ within their distributed art network. Without the gallery or even fixed media functioning as a definitive container of artwork, these artists seek to create a portal to a distributed network of on-demand experiences.

¹ Ebersman, David A. “Registration Statement on Form S-1.” *Registration Statement on Form S-1*. Facebook, Inc., 1 Feb. 2012. Web. 14 Aug. 2013.

² According to the global market intelligence firm International Data Corporation (IDC) Tucker, Patrick. “Denser Computer Memory.” *MIT Technology Review*. MIT, 7 May 2013. Web. 14 Aug. 2013.

³ Morran, Chris. “Google Update Begins Transition From Search Engine To ‘Knowledge Engine’” *Consumerist*. Consumerist, 16 May 2012. Web. 14 Aug. 2013.



Caption?

Can we anticipate thought by reading action? Google is working to create a search engine anyone can talk to. In the spirit of the shared consciousness concept, Google seeks to evolve from a search engine that gives information “to a knowledge engine, where they can rank content according to intent rather than straight keyword matching.”³ Using semantic sorting features such as “knowledge graphs” and “Google instant”, Google attempts to anticipate the user’s thoughts in an auto-correct feature designed to save the user time.

This knowledge engine was at play when the artist **Julia Kim Smith** took to Google in 2013 in order to produce the 1 min. video loop titled *Why?*. Before Kim Smith finished typing her question “*Why do asian women*” the knowledge engine kicked-in, anticipating her possible thoughts: “*like black men*”, “*age well*”, “*wear masks*” and so on. These results are all the more disturbing because there is no human intervention in the algorithm at Google that generates these results, as there is when they censor pornographic and violent words. According to algorithms, a common denominator of people (a type of shared consciousness) are privately asking Google these questions about Asian women more than they are asking anything else. Google reads the action of both individuals and collective social and geographic groups in order to anticipate users intentions when they type. When such algorithms are applied to a group of people, especially a minority, the presumed objectivity inherent in the search sanctifies the anticipated result as simply true. We’re left with the question: does the action of the masses constitute truth?

Algorithms are a benefit when they free up time in order to do tedious tasks. However growing concerns revolve around unmanned algorithms anticipating the future, or in Kim Smith's case, her thoughts about Asian women. Many blame the lack of human oversight over algorithms for the 'flash crash' – an event in 2010 when the stock market fell a thousand points in just a few minutes. The lesson here was that algorithms need to be rewritten every couple of weeks, have human intervention or preferably both. Similar algorithms are employed by police and FBI whose tactics include CRUSH, an algorithmic program designed to anticipate future crimes based on past activities. Because of inherent profiling within these algorithms, the results were disproportionate arrests within minority communities producing what David Lyon calls social sorting, a form of second-degree racism.⁴

When referring to social sorting at airports Zygmunt Bauman states: *"The dataset is an instrument of selection, separation and exclusion. It keeps the globals in the sieve and washes out the locals."*⁵ The practice of distinguishing tourists from drifters at national borders is familiar to the Bangladesh-born, New York City-raised artist, **Hasan Elahi** who willingly began posting his personal daily activities long before the social media phenomenon. The NSA, DHS, CIA and Executive Office of the President of the United States have all visited the artist's site over the years. It began on a return trip from the Netherlands on June 19th, 2002 when DHS officials sequestered Elahi for questioning: *"Who were you with...Why were you there?"* but then the questions become stranger, *"Where were you on September 12th 2001...September 10th...August 30th* (and so on)...*What is in your storage unit in Florida...are there explosives?"* Elahi surprised them by pulling out his PDA and giving exact details of his whereabouts and people he was with. After 6 months of intense interrogations by the FBI, and 9 consecutive polygraphs, the FBI confirmed his innocence and suggested that he inform them whenever he's traveling abroad in order to avoid further detentions (it's hard to get off a watch list).

Elahi took this advice seriously and dutifully gave international flight information until his self-scrutiny became obsessive. It eventually evolved into Elahi's signature project *Tracking Transience*, a database he now updates from his iPhone controlling detailed documentation of his private life, including his 24/7 GPS location with maps, images, what he eats, where he sleeps, etc. This public exposé defies the inherent value of data held by federal investigators, whose fragmentary information is their greatest commodity. It's a commodity which Elahi cleverly renders useless through his act of making it freely available. By taking control of his privacy he also feels he has more anonymity:



Caption?

*By putting this barrage of noise out there, I'm actually able to live a pretty anonymous life, you know very little about me. ... In an era where everything is cataloged, where everything is archived, there's no need to delete information anymore. So what do you do when everything is out there? You take control over it. If I give you this information directly it's a very different type of identity than if you were to go and get bits and pieces.*⁶

In addition to the reverse surveillance project *Tracking Transience* (available through a smart phone or portable tablet), Elahi exhibits *Hawkeye*, a 2012 photograph of the AT&T building at 611 Folsom Street in San Francisco. Elahi documented the building containing the now infamous NSA secret room that (along with other sites) intercepts 10% of the US internet traffic one year before Edward Snowden leaked it to the press, suggesting that the media can more easily capture the public's imagination by reframing 'truth in motion' from a leakers persona, rather than through the investigations of objective reporting.⁷ *Hawkeye* is exhibited as a digital image next to *Undisclosed Location*, another reverse surveillance piece of Elahi's own investigation browsing Google maps. Driven by curiosity, he found that an aerial view that was blocked as an "undisclosed location" by Google was actually former Vice President's Dick Cheney's home.

⁶ Elahi, Hasan. "Hasan Elahi: FBI, Here I Am!" TED: Ideas worth Spreading. Technology, Education and Design, Oct. 2011. Web. 14 Aug. 2013.

⁷ This story was reported in 2007 with little concern from the general public. "Video: The NSA's Eavesdropping at AT&T | Watch FRONTLINE Online | PBS Video." *PBS Video*. Frontline, 16 May 2007. Web. 14 Aug. 2013.

⁴ Lyon, David. *Surveillance Studies: An Overview*. Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2007. 94-117. Print.

⁵ Bauman, Zygmunt. *Globalization: The Human Consequences*. Cambridge, UK: Polity, 1998. 51. Print.

In addition to second-degree racism and human errors, social sorting is escalated when combined with the data-mining world of algorithmic errors. The consequences of these errors are at the core of *PolyCopRiotNode*, a project by artist team **Channel Two (CH2)**, Adam Trowbridge and Jessica Westbrook, working with Jesus Duran. Inspired by narratives mined from sources such as the Associated Press, *PolyCopRiotNode* counter-narrates incidents where DC police have used excessive force on unarmed civilians in the privacy of their homes based on a narrative derived from the police departments own erroneous information. Examples of excessive force in the Washington, DC area include pets who were killed in their homes, thousands of dollars of damage to private property, and an unarmed man who became paralyzed because a Police Corporal shot him in the back. To illustrate the geographic view of these intense reports, the artists use the built-in camera on a smartphone or tablet from the downloadable Layar browser. *PolyCopRiotNode* will then generate an animation layered over an otherwise ordinary DC street scene. The viewer can follow the augmented reality until they arrive where the "home invasion" allegedly occurred; the closer the viewer is physically to the node (street intersection) the more massive PolyCop becomes. Without a glint of nostalgia, the digital memory of these events appear as less of a deposit and retrieval system than as deployed actors revolving around facts that fluctuate between media machines and flawed data bases.



Caption?

More nostalgically, the artist **Taylor Hokanson's** kinetic installation *Palimpsest* is reminiscent of the analog collection of memory and data used by spying agencies when wire-tapping was slow and human-control was high (and needed a court order). *Palimpsest* slowly scans the roller from a discarded typewriter amplifying incidental text on a live monitor. Several images exhibit captured texts that fragment truths about a previous environment whose meaning we can now only guess: *"each department... needed... plastic back bones... a white... folder frame... 60619."* This still fairly recent style of data-mining is in stark contrast to meta-data-mining that exponentially expands its information archive building capabilities and thereby cultural memory itself.



Caption?

The reality of rebuilding memory from all the social media data and surveillance footage one can consume is proved a daunting task in the multi-media installation *Parent Folder* by Canadian artist **WhiteFeather**. WhiteFeather has been estranged from her father since she was 4 years old, an age when memories move from utter fragmentation into narrative snippets. Nearly 35 years ago, her father escaped to a remote Pacific Island in order to recreate his familial bond with the land. On October 23rd, 2012, the father allowed his daughter access to his life through a surveillance camera and an on-line archive called *Parent Folder*. A multi-media installation of the same name includes a stop motion video on a monitor and headphones, and invites the viewer to rest their head on a pillow and read the log that describes the artist's daily relationship with the archived surveillance footage and occasional Facebook postings (he doesn't do email). For instance, when hearing her father and a woman discuss the surveillance camera WhiteFeather writes: *"I wonder how long it will take for them to forget that I am watching... for a second I experience confusion again, as if he is right there with me, live, and then I remember that it is archived footage."* Living in a stop-motion relationship leaves the artist an addicted viewer constantly yearning for clarity. But will a higher resolution, more frames per second image bring the artist closer to her father? In the reverse-surveillance of the daughter gazing at the banality of her distant parent, she hunches at his thoughts and may wonder: *Who is he? Where do I come from?*

A polar opposite of the private remote-controlled surveillance of WhiteFeather and her father, is the high-stakes US drone program. The Dutch artist team, **The Force of Freedom**, Dutch artists Micha Prinsen and Aart Roscam Abbing, along with artist Dave Young, researched the US Drone program to create "*telewar*, a book exploring the culture of drones. ". The Force of Freedom also created the humorous video *Lexicon of a Drone War*, which cleverly uses the alphabet in order to display semi-secret government jargon surrounding drones.



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For 30 years the artist and programmer **David Rokeby** has observed thousands of viewers behaving within his interactive environments. Rokeby has observed that most participants do go through a series of predictable reactions where he can anticipate the participant's next action—if not their thought—by observing their gesture within his systems. His contribution for this exhibition is a unique computer installation that 'sees an object' and names it, entitled *Giver of Names*. In Rokeby's nod to Duchamp, spectators are invited to place an object on a pedestal where the system analyzes its color, texture, shape, scale and relationship to other objects on the pedestal. Rather than use a dictionary or encyclopedia to program the system, Rokeby "taught" the system by scanning scores of classical literature (such as *Moby Dick*), so that a richer textual inter-relationship could be established. For instance when random objects— perhaps including a yellow rubber ducky – is placed on the pedestal, *Giver of Names* may respond both audibly and on a monitor:

After another quarter day, across from many more of the shells, a brownish-yellow bath toy, on the left side of the one lake-water green inlet, will burn down all cresson houses, of the fighter, who has taken out this blood.

Rokeby exploits the free association of the viewer's perception between word and object as part of the piece. Everyone has agency. A significant contribution to this discussion is algorithms displaying a live process. The *Giver of Names* is unlike the structure of Google, which constantly seeks to improve its literal and clunky response, but here with nearly a thousand pages of one artist's programming code, Rokeby poignantly points to the machine's lack of consciousness. The awkward and paradoxical grammar is what the artist so cleverly exploits.

While exclaiming lyrical phrases, the *Giver of Names*' "knowledge engine" exposes the prejudicial flaws innate within the algorithms themselves and turns them into a subversive and poetic asset.

Rokeby's programming skill takes an unusual humanistic approach to writing code and algorithms in order to identify things, but it could be people. While most algorithms seem unchecked in their literal identifying of people, artists understand the need for control over identity that is public. The artists **Birgit Bachler, Walter Langelaar, Owen Mundy, and Tim Schwartz** and artist team **Preemptive Media**, Beatriz de Costa, Jamieson Schulte and Brooke Singer, openly display data that is often a hidden digital trail of a person's portrait. Since before the 1950's McCarthy era, the US government has been surveying information associated with the communication of private citizens by legally tracking the information on the outside of an envelope originally called 'mail cover.' This precedence is the current legal foundation – that has been expanding – for the US government to collect sender/receiver information on email. *Commodify.us* is aware of experts who say that "*the information associated with communication is of ten more significant than communication itself and the people doing the data mining know that.*"⁸ *Commodify.us* allows users and attendees to trace their Facebook 'mail cover' in order to uncover ones' public communication trends.



Caption?

While *Commodify.us* visualizes your personal net movement, the artist team **Preemptive Media** mimics marketing strategies in order to subvert their data-mining intentions. The artist collective emphasizes that the drive to mine data in the first place is the commercial gain motivated by advertising and marketing industries and the fact that these corporations allow the government to tap into their ingenuity is a regrettable bonus. In their project *Swipe* (2002-2013) the artists program original webcrawlers that capture a live data trail of exhibition visitors. Attendees scan their drivers license at the door and receive a receipt offering admission to the exhibition, a free glass of wine, and a portrait with instantly mined data that may

⁸ Marc Rotenberg of the Electronic Privacy Information Center. Risen, James, and Eric Lichtblau. "How the U.S. Uses Technology to Mine More Data More Quickly." *Revelations-give-look-at-spy-agencys-wider-reach*. New York Times, 8 June 2013. Web. 14 Aug. 2013.

include their race, gender, property value, income, body fat, and other seemingly private information. Aggregate portrait information of exhibition attendees is visible outside the gallery, updated live and displayed on the exterior of the exhibition space for passersby to probe the socio-economic portrait of the exhibition culture. The irony that the Pepco Edison Place Gallery is across from the National Portrait Gallery in Washington D.C. is not lost either. Inside the gallery, a kiosk will allow a deeper penetration and revelation of one's on-line identity. The climax of the game is distributed throughout the network of the artwork. The viewer may be gratified upon one pleasurable encounter, while experiencing horror or personal fear at another intellectual node of the work. Although creating pleasure mimics the skill of their marketing counterparts such as Acxiom – the largest international data-marketing corporation that holds scads of personal information on over 500 million people world wide – fear however, is part of the narrative arc presented by *Swipe*, although it's the antithesis of what Acxiom chooses to deliver.

Even stranger than meta-data anticipating thought is anthropomorphic surveillance looking into our very being. Beyond CCTV's lenses, communication and social networking surveillance, profiling may also be traced through sensors, biometrics, chemical profiling, and DNA surveillance. Since 1953 technology has been on a path to sequence both biology and computers into unified human-computer data hybrid. More significant than separating computer processing memory from storage memory, that year, biologists also first introduced Deoxyribonucleic Acid⁹ known today as A,T,G and C in DNA sequencing. Information artist and programmer **Heather Dewey-Hagborg** united this inevitable path by merging her own biometric software with the digitally compatible part of her DNA extraction in order to create her DNA surveillance work *Stranger Visions*.

Dewey-Hagborg collects human remains, hair, nails, gum, cigarette butts, etc. that have been discarded in public places. After extracting the DNA from a DIY Brooklyn based biotech lab (GENSPACE), she merges the significant information about the owner's race, gender, eye color, tendency for obesity, and other traits that she learned from the genetic code with her software. From this amalgamation she's able to produce a 3D rendering and output that portrait to a 3D printer. After producing a mask of NPR's Studio 360 host, Kurt Andersen, he reacted "*It's like finding a brother of me and saying 'I can see some of me in there.'*"¹⁰ In this exhibition Dewey-Hagborg displays four anonymous masks along with the original detritus and information about its original location.

In the advance technologies and sophisticated hyperbolic datagraphs, a new aesthetic of glitch, rhizomatic, and sfumato surveillance has emerged. Popularized by the data-enhanced artifact, CCTV bits and matter – a phenomenon gone viral

⁹ Dyson, George. *Turing's Cathedral: The Origins of the Digital Universe*. New York: Vintage, 2012. 9. Print.

¹⁰ Andersen, Kurt. "Making Portraits Out of DNA—Studio 360." *Studio360*. Studio 360, 8 Feb. 2013. Web. 14 Aug. 2013.



Caption?

after 9/11 and popularized by reality tv – makes the error, the raw, and real visible. In response to evidence of social sorting, performance and installation artist **Lexie Mountain** points to insecure boundaries in everyday life that occur when encountering someone sporting a black t-shirt with white block letters that says "SECURITY." In her performance *Ball Hard (Detail)* three security guard performers watch over the opening of *CYBER IN SECURITIES* incognito. At a pre-determined moment, the performers crack their assignment and collapse to the floor, forming a ball-like display in a pseudo-verbal expression of their personal insecurities. Lexie's research interviewing security guard professionals in public places such as the Security Mall in Baltimore also led to her glitch portrait of one of the security guard performers that will be on exhibit after the performance.

Is a computer glitch the cause of a poor DC man living in a wheelchair? What was the truth about Julia Kim Smith's thought? What does WhiteFeather know about her father? What is the role of the artists in a big brother-style society, one producing highly successful liars, and innocent truth-tellers that are endlessly subjected to polygraphs? Does the exhibition visitor have agency when viewing this work, or are the artworks a tight conspiracy producing merely predictable behaviors? The need to think freely when typing into a search engine or checking out a book at the library, to write poetry, look at art and read literature without the perception that ones thoughts are being anticipated seems pretty basic. This exhibition can only touch on artist's work exploring social sorting, profiling, and algorithms and doesn't attempt to address all surveillance and data-mining work being done, such as the complex relationship of surveillance and women for instance. But artists in this exhibition highlight burning concerns of people throughout the world: Are we free to learn in this massively fragmented, ever-evolving network of networks; and can society really anticipate thought by observing our actions?

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ABOUT WPA

Washington Project for the Arts (WPA) is an independent, nonprofit 501 (c)(3) organization whose mission is to serve as a catalyst for contemporary art. WPA supports artists at all stages of their careers and promotes contemporary art by presenting exhibitions, issues, and ideas that stimulate public dialogue on art and culture. www.wpadc.org.

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ABOUT THE PEPCO EDISON PLACE GALLERY

The mission of the Pepco Edison Place Gallery is to work with nonprofit arts organizations to sponsor a series of diverse, high quality art exhibits on behalf of the community. Admission is free. The entrance to the Pepco Edison Place Gallery is at 702 Eighth Street, NW, Washington, DC 20068, between G and H streets, directly behind the Pepco headquarters. Pepco's Edison Place headquarters is the first major office building in Washington, DC to be designed by a minority-owned architectural firm, Devroux & Purnell.



For more information about the Pepco Edison Place Gallery please visit www.twitter.com/PepcoGallery or <http://www.pepco.com/welcome/community/artgallery/>

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