

Collective Surveillance Play
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Will Pappenheimer
Pace University

Yoko Ono's "Breathe Together" drawing

Yoko Ono's drawing for the third day of the "13 days dance festival" in 1964 might appear to us now as an innocent representation of 60s Fluxus psychedelic peace generation artwork. I would like, however, to view it in a more serious tone as standing for three currents of consideration I am interested in addressing in the title for this presentation, not in order, of course. The friendly TV sketch signifies, the indisputable electronic expansive medium of the day. It was, and to a large extent still is, viewed as a unidirectional medium. That is to say commercial television produces an endless stream of highly marketed events and cultural spectacles and feeds them to a passive recipient audience. This model can also be understood as aligned with the classic panoptical scenario. Though it would seem that viewers were in a controlling gaze from the darkened TV room towards the bright flickering tube, television is understood mostly as networks controlling viewers by integrating advertising and market value systems into programming content while the viewer is "hypnotized" by picture, sound and emotional stimulation. Commerce and value systems are thus internalized.

Yoko Ono emphasizes this relationship through the commanding text "breathe together," ordering the audience to obey. The TV seems to look out on an imaginary audience, one that is still today willing to submit information, internalize marketing and embrace celebrity as a matter of cultural inclusion and safety. But Ono's twist begins in asking us to "breathe together" which does not fit a commercial strategy. It is a seemingly insignificant and daily activity, so normalized, so unspectacular that it would drive an audience away. Leaving this also a bodily function here incorporated into disincorporate electronic medium. Still other references point towards the currency of Eastern religious traditions which were at the time challenging the hegemony of Western Christian institutions and world views. Breathing "together" also suggests a counterpoint to modernity's trajectory of alienation, understood to the latent in television's pull towards your isolation. The invective suggests the possibility of using this cold nascent technology as a vehicle for community.

Finally, the date for this event is designated by three flowers. Each of the day's listing for the "13 days festival" is given a pictogram and a time by a Ono. The idea that art takes place in time, that the appointed time is random, mathematical and temporary, transfigures art and life into a game. Fluxus "events" are stripped of conventional temporal significance in order to be resignified by audience participation. Yoko Ono, by taking the mass media into "play," highlights serious social issues of the day with serious humor and poses a new potential for the technology. The flowers used to count the days most certainly take on the counter cultural significance of opposition to the Vietnam War and commercial artifice.

Dada, Anti-Art and Technology

90 years ago almost to the day (July 14, 1916) Tristan Tzara wrote the first Dada manifesto and called it "Mr. Antipyrine's Manifesto." Personalized by "Mr." and politicized (institutionalized) my "Manifesto", the name suggests the idea of an oppositional approach to art and cultural production on multiple levels and initiates the beginning of a long history of anti-art which has reinvented itself to this very day. In a paradoxically self-reflexive manner it declares the stance against the, many dogmas of (and in quotations) discipline, morality, naturalism, paint, social hierarchy, good manners, logic, the future, memory and the "shameful sex of comfortable compromise." Dada's and anarchistic core reflected a deep protest towards the socio-political forces leading the surrounding countries into the first World War. However, this "destructive action" was also its positive force embracing all objects, images, contradictions, "amorous ideas" and "every god that is the immediate product of spontaneity."

Dada's interest in the products of technology takes many forms including imagery, noise composition, and sculptural kinetics. At the same time as it represents industrial production and efficiency, now applied to warfare, it undoubtedly represented more of a gravitation towards what Dada saw as "abstraction," that is everything antithetical to naturalism and 19th century romanticism. It was artwork in the real world, stripped of pretension. Later, Marcel Duchamp declared his affinity for "amusing science" saying to Brancusi, "Painting is finished! What can be done better than this propeller?..." Duchamp's interest in the technological and practical readymade not only tested the category of art but also attacked the foundations of art as aesthetic mastery. Coupled with the Surrealists intentions, technology and automation became a means of revealing the subconscious and subverting bourgeois culture and ideology, not to mention the doldrums of living a normalized life. Systems of logic art were used to overturn themselves. In her seminal essays on "Formless" Rosalind Krauss suggests that Duchamp's interest in mechanized vision, reveals a bodily and mechanized apparatus of vision, harnessing primal drives for death and repetition forward and against the construction of the Lacanian symbolic façade. I would suggest that our interest as artists in technology today is not in the technological sublime, but rather in the deep rivers etched out by our predecessors almost a century ago. Practical codes of computer production and control are employed and subjected to anterior irrational systems to generate unexpected events.

Anti-Art

A very brief historical recollection of anti-art strategy is valuable for a discussion of contemporary new media works if only to offer a string of comparative notes. If we start with Dada as contradictory, posing art as oppositional, disordered, anti-institutional, performative and as driven by a conceptual rather than a visual thesis, then Duchamp adds the corollary that art is a nominal rather than an intrinsic object. The readymade tests art as category and establishes the lasting principle of contextual resignification. Chance in equal measure with artistic intention, as the operative or generative force in an artwork, begins with Duchamp and is taken to further limits by

John Cage. Cage and Fluxus transform conventional harmony and composition into concrete noise and performance, as all manner of artwork becomes event, and events become art. The creation of work shifts from artists to audiences, from viewing to participation. Fluxus employed numerical or randomized games to play or scramble analogs of social order and convention. Situationism opposed the institutionalized city grid with drift and attraction and sought the alteration of cultural production in "detournement" and overlay. Minimalism, while emptying even abstraction of all artifice also merged industrial production with artistic production. Earthworks claimed the landscape and sky as artwork and used the gallery as its container. Performance art replaced the art object with corporeality and temporal activity, while Conceptual Art assert the primacy of art as simply an idea. Both these movements nearly shut down the gallery system in the 1970s. Finally in the recent past, Postmodernism, a very diverse set of directives indeed, posited art as semiotics, that is, as always producing and reproducing culture through meaning and context. One of its most well-known anti-art strategies was the descendent of the Duchamp's readymade, appropriation, which in its transformation or slippage from one context to another tested categories and identities of gender, ethnicity and political ideology. Postmodernism advanced the problematic notions of reproduction and simulation which fundamentally destabilizes artistic and cultural categories. It launched a psychoanalytic perspective for art and positioned text as art and art as text.

But I am here to talk about technology and art. So why this digression? Because I believe it so informs our work in this area today. Fundamental to my interest in anti-art, descended from Dada, is what I might call, enthusiastic opposition, that is testing boundaries and institutions and opening up paradigms, even as it may be in gesture only.

Play

Play is another practice and aspect of art making which Dada seemed to take on early on in its history. The notion of art as game now enjoys a long tradition but would most probably not have been associated with the seriousness of a turn of the century art masterpiece. Much can be said of this very human activity but I would like to highlight the concept of translating, real world adult activities and institutions into gestural or symbolic counterparts, and subjecting them to combinations of chance and mimicry. On the surface play is often associated with childhood, the tendencies of foolishness, absurdity or exaggeration. However, more significant scrutiny reveals underlying psychological theories of testing individuation, cultural taboo, death drives and creative destructivity. Whether play is adult or child it represents a somewhat unusual sphere of experimentation in which radical or transgressive ideas can be entertained and alternate modalities can be tested. Ultimately the rise of the Avante Garde in the artworld led to the question so often raised in the world at large, is the art of is it blague? This question is also self-reflexive, as the participants engage and question the same activities they themselves conduct.

Surveillance

Next to the entertainment paradigm, surveillance continues to be one of the most prevalent models of contemporary sociological conditions. To enumerate its permutations would take the entirety of this essay. The practice is generally understood as the rational and purposeful observation of a person or group or their effects or activities. It could be as subtle as a glance or as technologically extensive as a genomic assay. Its most efficient ultimate teleology is the dissemination of self-surveillance. Methods of surveillance begin with sensory attributes such as seeing, the hearing and smelling and are happily extended to electronics such as video, audio and data collection. Recording is critical to the goals of quantifying, statistical analysis, organizing, graphing, evaluating, assessment, and reporting. Surveillance tends to connote a rational or methodological approach which is distant, disciplined and scientific. But underlying the practices of observation, as Michel Foucault so carefully outlined in the model of the Panopticon, are frequently goals of social control and the efficient management of myriad institutional boundaries. The directives of surveillance also migrate to psychological undercurrents such as sexual obsession or paranoia. Invariably surveillance precipitates binaries of prison/prisoner, institution/subject and self/other.

The Digital age coupled with the Internet has of course introduced a wealth of possibilities for the surveillance paradigm. Free flowing data in a form of text, numbers and images, subjected to spiraling computer power, is the perfect scenario. This time collection can take place on a global scale. Web cameras and when the broadcast is cheaper and simpler than ever before. So integrated is the entertainment camera eye that enthusiastic private personalities broadcast their daily activities to anyone that might take interest. Online commercial enthusiasm encourages an endless stream of willing personal data submission. In the US the success of disseminating terrorist fears has generated an acceptance of surveillance in the name of safety. These practices have brought the nomenclatures of Data mining into the public domain with words such as: data mapping, pattern recognition. "pulling " and "pushing" information, k-fold cross validation, holdout methods, regression methods, and Combinatorial game data mining.

The discipline of "Surveillance Studies" has grown out of this primary focus and represents the exploration and theorization of an expansive surveillance society. In a recent paper entitled, "The Plays and Arts of Surveillance: Studying Surveillance as Entertainment," written for surveillance-and-society.org, authors Albrechtslund and Dubbeld, explore the alterior potential of surveillance in playful, humorous, pleasurable and even caring practices. The paper suggests a the need for a new inquiry into surveillance modalities in gaming and entertainment that is not a repetition of conventional critiques.

Untitled 5, Camille Utterback, 2004

Camille Utterback explains her recent work as utilizing “kinetic” audience participation and video tracking software to engage controlled programmed algorithmic systems in a generation of time-based painterly compositions. The system is sufficiently complex and responsive to allow for many unexpected results as well as the tracing of movement in time. The understanding of painting as inherently time based and performative, even Abstract Expressionism as removed from authentic emotional gesture, is not necessarily a new concept. However, this work also gains traction through the use of a surveillance tracking model to generate a somewhat familiar painterly image. This approach suggests a counter directionality to anti-art in that elements of a problematic surveillance system are utilized to generate aesthetically pleasing and familiar artistic products. The results destabilize both categories. Utterback is clear that aesthetic results are generated by a programmatic system rather than the traditional emotive spectacle of the artist. Coupled with her resistance to producing finished prints of rather “beautiful” moments in the process, this seemingly aesthetic work becomes resistant to still prevalent artist and artworld directives. This kind of painting is, after all, temporary, automatic, infinitely regenerative, and perhaps unsettlingly based in a more or less invisible tracking camera.

CarnivorePE, Radical Software Group, Alex Galloway, 2000 to present

CarnivorePE (Public Edition), initiated by the Radical Software Group (RSD) with Alex Galloway in 2000 and continuing to present, establishes its intention as act of mimicry or simulation. It simulates the sinister 1990’s FBI directive to conduct data surveillance of public organizations and the chat room conversations of ordinary citizens. This project mimics the production of software by positing the artwork as generating “clients”. That is to say, the artwork is also conceptual program which generates work among artists who apply its method of network packet “sniffing” and keyword sorting to generate their own artworks. Hence, artistic originality is lost several times along the way. The fact that the artwork was designed as and remains an entity of free- and open- sourced software sets its problematic course for art world collection. In many of the applications “user” artists have engaged software, beginning with the first software client written by RSG, to produce a distinctly aesthetic computer image from the collected data. However this is not to be understood as a return to the abstract sublime, but rather color and composition generated by a data surveillance. Much like the geometric prison paintings of Peter Halley in the 1980’s, abstraction slips into institutional or political ideology. Conversely, the questionable collection of the data, which continues disturbingly today in the US, is transformed into harmless and even pleasing results. It is interesting to note that the digital processes implemented in generating artworks reflect the burgeoning field of data-mining which many have associated with artificial intelligence. In other words, as the software makes choices about data relationships, it needs to emulate very human processes of cross-reference and association, however paranoid these might be.

Wolfgang Staehle: “2004”

Wolfgang Staehle’s last exhibition in New York entitled simply, “2004”, featured, as is characteristic of the artists work, three live webcam broadcasts on the walls of Postmasters gallery. Two of these were exhibited as very large scale high resolution projections with successive frames crawling slowly on a horizontal line down the height of the image. One image originated from the Hudson River Valley in upstate New York, the other from across the East River, framing the dramatic site of midtown Manhattan. The reference is clearly to the dramatic/romantic landscape, perhaps of 19th century painting. In this case, like Duchamp, Staehle takes readymade webcam surveillance and reframes it as continuation of aesthetic landscape. Unlike Duchamp, however, this represents move to reinscribe the sublime. Similarly, the real time artwork, a descendant of the Fluxus “event” in “event-time” sections off a part of open-ended real world time and designates it as art time. But Staehle is not interested in super-boredom or the re-display of items of production, that is, the difficult perception of the endless normal or the utilitarian object, but rather in the spectacular. I might conjecture that it is the force of this grandeur that is needed to overcome the complacency and position of low quality commonplace web cameras. A talk with the gallery director also reveals the difficulties of purchasing and maintaining these works. Not only do the technologies of display need to be acquired but also a permanent location for the web camera on the Hudson River, for example. This is certainly not impossible for the art world which has found ways of maintaining earthworks by such artists as Smithson and Turrell. But add to this work the element of digital temporality and accessibility, and its location or identity, as physical, as web-based, as video or as software, becomes severely confused.

Blast Theory

Can You See Me Now? 2001

Engaging GPS, PDAs and cell phone communications rather than webcams, Blast Theory’s “Can You See Me Now?” takes on both the look and sensibility of a surveillance espionage thriller. But it is also decidedly the “hybrid” of video game conventions, virtual and real world cityscape, and the development of nascent telecommunications. Its creators suggest that it tests the intersection of global virtual terrain against an alienated urban landscape raising questions concerning the emotive possibilities of virtual meeting places, such as the now famous MySpace.com. These more serious questions are channeled through the draw of play space. There are rules to the game. Online “players” use surrogates to chase down “runners”. “Runners” must not be seen. Players manipulate their surrogates through online virtual space. This is clearly a playful surveillance which, as artwork engages “fun” and mock espionage in order to unveil conceptual questions and an unsettling situations. The question posed to online players, “Is there someone you haven’t seen for a long time that you still think of?” and any unexpected problems in the communications network open up gaps in supposedly multiple seamless communications.

Surveillance Camera Players, 1995–

The New York City Surveillance Camera Players (SCP) initiated their agitart activities in New York city but now have satellite groups in Arizona, California and internationally in Italy, Lithuania, Sweden and Turkey. They present themselves as a sort of performance protest citizen group whose unannounced theatrics are played out and recorded in front of existing surveillance cameras in stores, subways, ATMs and other assorted institutions. They generally plan a performance or enact a play such as Alfred Jarry's Ubi Roi or Becket's "Waiting for Godot." Instructions for recruiting players in a 1995 Dada-like manifesto read:

"...guerilla actions at 24-hour bank machines aren't too productive. The group can choose to emulate the traditional structures of theatre, cinema, the TV sitcom or documentary, or just wing it and go free-style. A group could choose a regular time slot, say Thursday nights at 8:30, to air their program or instead choose to put on a big 5 hour gala production."

The spontaneous playful humor, planned foolishness, and often risky interventions that pervade their work establish the experimental ground for a clear challenge to commercial and panoptical goals of contemporary control societies. Though the artworks are essentially invisible temporal events, some surveillance tapes have been obtained. This is artwork that takes place within real world institutions. It may never see the light of gallery walls. It highlights the potential for surveillance activity to be seen as artifice rather than evidence, as theater rather than empty record.

David Rokeby

The Giver of Names (1990–) (in progress)

With the pervasiveness of surveillance today, as multiplying technologies and as inseparable from the formation social interactions, it is more challenging to consider constructive possibilities for this apparatus. Increasingly, added to the digital capacity of video recording, is the field of image recognition. Motion detection used to trigger recording or alarm is the most well known application of this technology. Iris, fingerprint and face recognition are now employed in airports and throughout the business world for identification and the ever expanding terror "safety" net. Many computer scientists are engaged in the exploration and use of more sophisticated algorithmic image analysis as well as the subsequent steps of data comparison correlation. Again this avenue takes us to the arena of AI, that is, the simulation or elaboration of the processes and epistemologies of human perception. How do we recognize what we see? Many levels of apperception are involved, from shape or color to memory or enculturation. Often ahead of game, Canadian artist David Rokeby pioneered image recognition as early as 1990 with his on-going installation work "The Giver of Names". A participant places an object in front of the camera and, in an adjacent video projection the procedural analysis of the image in terms of shape, color and components, is aesthetically displayed. In Rokeby's words:

“The results of the analytical processes are then 'radiated' through a metaphorically-linked associative database of known objects, ideas, sensations, etc. The words and ideas stimulated by the object(s) appear in the background of the computer screen, showing what could very loosely be described as a 'state of mind'.

From the words and ideas that resonate most with the perceptions of the object, a phrase or sentence in correct English is constructed and then spoken aloud by the computer.”

Rokeby notes that the experience of the artwork is not an attempt to mimic the accurate identification or description of objects, but rather to set up an alternate point of view and/or the semiotic gap between language as signifier and object as signified. Here, as in the precedents of Dada, Surrealism and Fluxus, the automatic system of programming is used to confound or open up a fixed social system. Paradoxically, the computer is both the methodical source and potential scrambler of meaning, a Frankenstein poet who destroys the logic of institutional language.

Collective Surveillance Community

If the proliferation of a global network of surveillance webcams and data-veillance raises questions about competing models corporeal and virtual culture, then as Blast Theory inquires, what are the problematics and possibilities for community or public engagement in a virtual civic sphere? Does this paradigm degenerate into scopophilic relations, systems of media control, alienation and inaction. Paul Virillo suggests that in the increasing predominance of an Internet virtual city of telecommunications, physical space, identity and intelligibility collapse. Control pervades every system of life from the nano to the macro. By eliminating the corporeal encounter, a workable lived civic space is jeopardized and the world heads towards a catastrophic instantaneous network accident.

I would suggest, however, that the teleologic goal of virtual mastery, if it happens, has not arrived. We still live as we always have in a mixed environment, The virtual and the corporeal are layered or entwined in ways that might seem novel, but actually resemble the early chorographic models of the Greek philosophers. Chorography was understood as the mixture of geography, experience and representation, literary and artistic. The wandering theoretician reported location as the experience of place at the intersection of multiple disciplines such as geography, history, literature, art and memory as well as biography. Understanding the Internet as a navigational, textual, image and data space, encourages a "poetic encounter" connecting both and living and virtual cities. Surveillance, in this paradigm functions as a witness, linked to institutional discourses, not as knowledge, but in a continuous state of becoming. Real time web cameras, connect geographical and body prosthesis with a reconfigured or reconfigurable Internet landscape. This surveillance can be envisioned as a form of distributed network vision quite unlike the centralized hierarchical panopticon of Michel Foucault. In this sense webcam networks become a collective vision. One that represents the gift of all its participants.

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