

CONFERENCE

Transmediale 15: Capture All

It was exactly one year after Edward Snowden made his revelations that a group of artists, digital activists, journalists and even one retired British military attaché set off on a historical bus tour of Berlin's secret installations in an event called the 'Magical Secrecy Tour' and organised by the Transmediale Festival. Berlin is the refuge of many whistleblowers and sees itself, according to Transmediale's director, Kristoffer Gansing, as the 'capital of resistance to mass surveillance'. It is certainly necessary to take into consideration Laura Poitras's compelling fly-on-the-wall documentary *Citizenfour* before considering whether this is true, bearing in mind journalist Glen Greenwald's term describing the revelation that we are all subject to the 'Full Take' – the concept that mass data collection and analysis of all our movements is a given.

Considering the large number of listening stations in Berlin, it might be said that the city could be seen by the powers-that-be as a convenient place to keep 'digital dissidents' under close view in their own user-friendly playground. But who are these powers-that-be? The big multinational digital corporations such as Apple, Google, Microsoft and Facebook protested loudly when Snowden revealed that the NSA was hacking directly into their feeds, harvesting vast amounts of data for future use, illegally in the US but legally via the UK's own GCHQ. At several panels in Transmediale it was pointed out that the collection of data is an economic, as well as a political or security issue. So – it was asked by several delegates at the conference – why should corporations protest when nation-states gather the same information that they hoard and carefully sift for the purposes of profit? Furthermore, a live feed of, for example, high-frequency trading would be an interesting asset. As I write, the British army is recruiting 'Facebook warriors' – the 77th division – to bring social media to the battleground, to penetrate the 'darknet' and seek out the naughty squad (terrorists, drug dealers, arms dealers, child pornographers) as well as fighting the propagandists of IS and others. As artist Jordan Crandall said at the conference: 'Technologies of convenience become technologies of attack.'

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Wages for Facebook was a campaign that went viral last year, based on the 1970s feminist campaign Wages for Housework, adapted from Silvia Federici's 1974 essay of that title. Founder Laurel Ptak was at the conference, expressing surprise that her manifesto, containing phrases like 'they say it's friendship – we say it's unwaged work' and 'they call it sharing – we call it stealing', caught the spirit of the decade. In truth, her protest turns out to be even more complex. Echoing Federici, she goes on to say: 'In fact, to demand wages for Facebook does not mean to say that if we are paid we will continue to do it. It means precisely the opposite ... [it] is the first step towards refusing to do it, because the demand for a wage makes our work visible, which is the most indispensable condition to struggle against it.'

A number of artists in the exhibition continue this theme of trying to control their own datafication, notably the group Art Is Open Source in its Stakhanov project, for which they have created their own data-god followed by a global data religion; Jennifer Lyn Morone, who has patented her own personality in an attempt to capture the income from her social-media choices; and Heather Dewey Hageborg, who has developed the 'first ever tactical kit for your protection against emerging threats to biological privacy'. This last is particularly relevant as scientists are talking about DNA itself being a potential new source of information storage. The strategies in the exhibition seem to be the classic reappropriation strategies seen in art every decade or so and as such contain an element of déjà vu, reminding me of the work of, for example, General Idea. However, the context is continuously changing and as this process matures the strategies can become increasingly bold and inventive. Take, for example, the Robin Hood Minor Asset Management Fund, a new hedge fund initiated by artists and activists and apparently doing very nicely, thank you. This was one example given by theorist Tiziana Terranova, who spoke evocatively at the conference about this new ecology

of 'multitudes of non-human agencies and components'.

In his opening address, again arguing for Transmediale and Berlin as a safe haven, Gansing spoke of the 'never-ending loop of datafication' which can only be allayed by blind spots of resistance. One such blind spot which particularly interested me was a screening and discussion by artist Nadav Assam about his work with Jake Wells of 'FleshPilot', who is a professional tattooist, DIY drone builder and possibly the world's first 'RC' – remote control Christian minister in 'Lessons on Leaving Your Body'. Wells is immobile, sitting on a rock in a prayer pose, staring at his own image while his drone circles him sending a remote 'drone selfie'. 'You're flying that flesh – your soul is in a different place.' He has developed his own theology – 'Like the Father and Son ... it turns where I tell it. I don't have to deal with evil and disorientation.' You see him constructing his own DIY quadcopter while reflecting on his life as a near-suicidal homeless person. This is technology as redemption.

Over at Club Transmediale there is a mirror-image festival (it used to be the music fringe to Transmediale but has morphed into a festival in its own right, 'Untuned', complete with exhibition) which is focused on direct mediation between digital technology and the body, among other things. Mexican artist Leslie Garcia has convened a music-makers' hacklab – an ambitious maker-fest which ends up with the first performance (at least the first I have seen) by an unborn baby. Theresa Schubert, the mother, and Marco Donnarumma, the father, collaborated in an event in which the mother and child were wired up to ultrasound equipment and the heartbeat and the kicks of the baby were mixed live to the audience. Here, biological privacy is voluntarily relinquished, although it will be interesting to hear the views of the future artist when he/she is able to comment. The full take, before you are even born. ■

Transmediale Festival ran 28 January to 1 February in Berlin. www.transmediale.com

ROB LA FRENAIS is an independent curator.