



Main Space

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***VPN to IRL* curated by Tak Pham**

Ronnie Clarke, Marlon Kroll, Sophia Oppel, Tommy Truong

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“Facebook wants to know your location. Block or Allow.” A notification box appears at the top left corner of a Chrome browser every time Facebook detects that the user has no existing cookies on their computer. Technology always wants to know where its users are, how they move, and where they travel, so it can provide a tailored technological experience unique to each person. “Were you just at location X?” “Are you at cafe Y? Here are some reviews.” “What is your destination?” *VPN to IRL* brings together works by artists Ronnie Clarke, Marlon Kroll, Sophia Oppel and Tommy Truong to inquire into the role of invisible data collecting technology in contemporary living.

Information and communication technology (ICT) has become ubiquitous in contemporary living. Its finest manifestation to date, the smartphone, has crept into every micro-corner of Western society,¹ to the point where it is possibly both the first and last thing an average Canadian interacts with on a daily basis. In the names of convenience and easy living, ICT takes hold of the user’s social experience through seemingly harmless suggestions that prioritize expediency over self-security -- for example, the series of suggestive communicative gestures exemplified by the above questions generated by Facebook. The operation of ICT depends on its capacity to extract information from its users in the form of data. This data, in turn, goes to a selected number of beneficiaries of the technology, who

¹ Beatriz Colomina, and Mark Wigley. *Are We Human: Notes on an Archeology of Design* (Zurich: Lars Müller, 2016).

will then use the information to strategize ways to use the public as disposable resources. To ensure smooth operation, the owners of the technology hide the exploitative device behind a transparent and reflective façade – a two-way mirror – that reflects to the users their own images. Consumed by narcissism, the users may hardly notice how much of themselves that they have given away until it is too late. Under a data-centric regime, awareness marks not the moment of realization, but rather the moment of expiration; subjecthood ceases when there is no more data at disposal.

In “The Image and the Void” (2015), Trinh T. Minh-Ha concludes that in a world where the visual is dominant, “invisibility is built into each instance of visibility, and the very forms of invisibility generated within the visible are often what is at stake in a struggle.”² For Trinh, examples such as the chairs at international congregations left vacant for Chinese activists and academics who were imprisoned or under house-arrest, signify a corporeal phenomenology in the intangible - the very characteristic experienced by the Internet users. Whereas Trinh’s case studies emphasize the affluence of *absentia*, the exhibition *VPN to IRL* takes an interest in the insidiousness of the *unseen*. The curatorial vision of the exhibition addresses the ‘unseen’ less as a sign of resistance, but more as a manipulative strategy designed to conceal the exploitative mechanism of the technology from, and go unnoticed by, users.

Recognizing the influential scope of the *unseen*, this exhibition employs an incognito strategy that imitates one of the communication tactics in Internet warfare used by activists: a Virtual Private Network (VPN), a secured system of point-to-point private connection.³ Designed to protect the exchange of information on unsecured public internet networks, as well as under totalitarian circumstances where user’s activity and information are of interest to the government, the technology navigates the restraints of the network by detouring on an encrypted connection directly to the host server. Expanding beyond the common visualization of data on screens, the projects in the exhibition virtually expose the real-time

² Trinh T. Minh-Ha, “The Image and the Void,” *Journal of Visual Culture* 15, no. 2 (2015): 132.

³ Per Skålén, Kotaiba Abdul Aal, and Bo Edcardsson, “Cocreating the Arab Spring: Understanding Transformation of Service Systems in Contention,” *Journal of Service Research* 18, no. 3 (2015): 250-264.

exploitative effects of data-collecting technology on the self as an effort to awaken the user's consciousness before their body expires. Together, Clarke, Kroll, Oppel and Truong realize the curatorial goal by establishing a virtual private network inside the architecture of Xpace. The artists maintain a stable reciprocal relationship among the four unique projects to establish a secured network allowing an opportune space to emerge while remaining unseen. Within the 'VPN' of the exhibition, the works mobilize a political act of revealing - where the user experience protests, manifests, and actualizes the consequences of concealment and the prescription of technology.

Digital artist Tommy Truong creates a minimalist and strictly protocolled entry to the exhibition's experience. His enlarged QR code reverses the intimate intention of the technology, and abstracts it into visible fractals of data-bits. The significant scale of data is intended to overwhelm its viewers, forcing them to engage their whole body by physically moving away from the work in order to activate it. Once they are 'online,' viewers are provided with identifiers that translate the relationship between their body and their environment into a set of digital coordinates. The smartphones used to access Truong's QR code become the mediating screen through which the user's control of their body resembles the experience of dragging the yellow body along the grids of Google Maps. Cognitive scientist James Miller's 2014 analysis of the inter-corporeal effect of smartphones, suggests that technology integrates our bodies into an ecological media system where the functionalities of the media become naturalized elements of the built environment where these bodies inhabit.⁴ In the current reality, the body is abstracted into x-y coordinates, the environment is broken down to grids, and movements are traceable. The locative number changes as the body maneuvers through the space. Each movement and action is time-stamped and recorded diligently on a host server that only the artist has the authority to access.

In his installation *Tell Me Everything You Saw, and What You Think It Means*, sculptor and installation artist Marlon Kroll opens a portal to allow the viewers access to the

⁴ James Miller, "The fourth screen: Mediatization and the smartphone," *Mobile Media & Communication* 2, no. 2 (2014): 211.

other side of the surveying double mirror. Featuring still images of people's backs taken from the movies *Others* (2006), *The Conversation* (1974) and *Rear Window* (1954), the work seeks to trouble the ethics of watching people – a harmless act until the intention becomes clear. The backs of the figures, and the empty mirrors in Kroll's photos act as a firewall, keeping the intention of the subject out of sight. Kroll's subjects appear to be ordinary people engaging in mundane activities. From the back, they all appear unaware of being monitored and surveyed by viewers. Kroll borrows the interface of a surveillance room to composite a series of framed and unframed inkjet photos in various sizes that are installed across the wall. The rectangular screens eliminate the physical boundaries and virtually shorten the distance between the observer and the subject; however, this disparateness can never be fully integrated. A sense of suspicion will remain with the subjects whose backs always orient towards the viewer. The effort in "making visible the invisible"⁵ affirms the influential role of optics in one's manifestation of gestures and behaviours. The discrepancy between perceived behaviours and intentions suggests that surveillance is speculative. The desire to overwrite the *unseen* fuels the obsession of data collecting, of tracking points of reference, and of invading privacy. Through the collage of images, Kroll highlights the subjectivity in viewer's perception of reality, and how perceptive it is to sophisticated influences that are induced by the *invisible*.

To further explore how the *invisible* can produce corporeal effects on the viewers, Sophia Oppel's multimedia installation, *Terms of Service*, explores the corporate employment of virtual concealment as a tool for exploitation. The work explores the hegemonic yet decentralized power that is inherent in digital infrastructure. Oppel builds an architectural representation of digital surveillance that physically engages the viewer's body in order to trouble the perception of a 'safe space,' and questions the validity of personal authority on the Internet. Oppel's architecture takes shape on an empty white wall as the data builds up negative spaces that are branded and incorporated. 3D scanned fragments of Xspace's interior are rebuilt with transparent acrylic sheets inside the gallery. Despite being disruptive to movement, the material is transparent and smooth. A small camera mounted out of sight captures the viewer's movement in the gallery, and projects it back onto the

⁵ Trinh, *The Image of visual culture*, 131.

acrylic structure and the wall. Viewers will eventually catch a glimpse of themselves, as well as the transparent text from corporate terms of service from corporations such as Facebook, Instagram, and Axis Communication engraved on the architectural surface. The immersive experience captures the very moment of enlightenment. The complete experience of the work signals the expiry of subjecthood and the full nullification of individual rights.

The inherent bio-politics of Internet technology throughout the exhibition is prominent in Ronnie Clarke's experimental work, *READING TOGETHER*. Comprised of video, text and performance, this virtual reality-based project uses text as an agent to choreograph movements. Clarke has used Google Street View to create a textual environment for the VR headset – the spatial experience in the text referencing movement across distance. As the VR wearer moves their body to read the text, they also read it aloud to the second performer, who performs the instruction. The VR headset allows the wearer to become the technology, granting them the autonomy over their technical behaviour. Despite the expectation to synchronize, the two bodies interpret and move incongruously. This discrepancy reemphasizes the illusion of an optimal efficiency promised in the statements expressed in Opper's *Terms of Service*. Moreover, the exertive tension between the two bodies highlights the impact that technology structure has on corporeal experience. Social researchers Per Skåln, Kotaiba Abdul Aal, and Bo Edvardsson in their study of the role of communication technology in 2011 Arab Spring (2015) suggests a transformation of service systems with a value co-creation in contention. Defining "service system" as dynamic configurations of actors and resources,⁶ the three researchers identify "opportunity spaces", where activists can counteract the protocol or the regime by displaying the frictions along social divisions. In a virtual reality/ Internet context, the discord between the two performing bodies in Clarke's work allows the opportunity space to widen providing refuge for the bodies that have been over-exploited by corporates and those who hold the means. Clarke's space is built on the webbed system of Google Maps; however, it exists off the grid by building a virtual private network of transformative actions.

⁶ Skåln, "Cocreating the Arab Spring," 251.

Despite their perceived ephemerality and transparency, all four projects elicit physical annoyances. They transform visual exuberance of digital graphics into obstacles that trigger the viewer's paranoia. In visually obscure areas of the gallery, the theme of surveillance repeats itself in different manifestations. The viewer's experience oscillates between active and passive participation while engaging with each work. The exhibition immerses the viewer's body in a network of constant experiential feedback between the viewers and the artworks. It exposes the viewers to the insidious mechanism of data surveillance technology while protecting them from being compromised by the system. They become aware of not only how the virtual system of experience is constructed, but also how their reactions are suggested by the very architecture of the system. The regime of surveillance operates on the ability to collect and exploit by 'invisibly' observing, and the very same awareness is shared by regular VPN users whenever they access the Internet using a vulnerable network. They codify their online behaviours to protect their bodies from being exploited. They are aware that they need to watch their back and proceed with caution on any smooth surface of the Internet.

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References:

Colomina, Beatriz and Mark Wigley. *Are We Human: Notes on an Archeology of Design* (Zurich: Lars Müller, 2016).

Miller, James. "The fourth screen: Mediatization and the smartphone," *Mobile Media & Communication* 2, no. 2 (2014): 209-226.

Skålén, Per, Kotaiba Abdul Aal, and Bo Edcardsson, "Cocreating the Arab Spring: Understanding Transformation of Service Systems in Contention," *Journal of Service Research* 18, no. 3 (2015): 250-264.

Trinh T. Minh-Ha, "The Image and the Void," *Journal of Visual Culture* 15, no. 2 (2015): 131-140.

List of works:

Ronnie Clarke, *READING TOGETHER*, 2016

Cardboard VR set, two-channel video on loop

07:28

03:12

Marlon Kroll, *Tell Me Everything You Saw, and What You Think It Means*, 2017

Inkjet print on glossy paper, solvent print on adhesive vinyl, solvent print on banner, mirror and ceramic

Sophia Oppel, *Terms of Service*, 2017

Laser cut on acrylic, projection and camera

Tommy Truong, *Blind Date 2.0*, 2017

QR Code Print on Vinyl, Web-based <http://tommytruong.info>

Instruction:

1. Download QR Code Reader or Snapchat
 - 1.2 iPhone users can Scan QR codes through chrome. Simply search QR code through the iPhone search and click Scan QR Code (with the chrome symbol)
2. Load application and scan QR code
3. Allow navigation to tommytruong.info