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Signals, Statistics and Social Experiments

The governance conflicts of electronic media arts

The term “governmentality,” coined some 25 years ago by Michel Foucault, describes what is essentially a feedback process: the endlessly renegotiated balances of what he calls a “microphysics of power,” where each individual contributes a vital force to the production of the social frameworks that condition his or her behavior. Under this view, power does not just come down on a population from above, that is, from the state and those whose interests it serves. Rather, it also arises from the activity of those whose invention and conviction are required to shape the prevailing usages and norms. Thus the substantial reality of citizenship, for a governmentality theorist like Nikolas Rose, does not only consist of participation in a formal “public sphere,” where enfranchised individuals debate over the dispositions and meanings of universal law. Instead, he says, “games of citizenship” are played out in the most diverse arenas:

“The citizen as consumer is to become an active agent in the regulation of professional expertise. The citizen as prudent is to become an active agent in the provision of security. The citizen as employee is to become an active agent in the regeneration of industry and as consumer is to be an agent for innovation, quality and competitiveness ... This kind of ‘government through freedom’ multiplies the points at which the citizen has to play his or her part in the games that govern him. And, in doing so, it also multiplies the points at which citizens are able to refuse, contest, challenge those demands that are placed upon them.”¹

The strength of Rose’s work is to have retraced in detail many of the procedures that have been developed since WWI for conceiving a population’s self-conduct in psychological terms, observing and measuring its variability, inscribing it as statistics, and then calculating the effects of the government programs, advertising messages and market offers that are designed to channel it in specific directions. On one hand, these are scientific procedures for producing the so-called objective truth of behavior, and thereby norming it. But the claim being made in the analysis of governmentality is that a large degree of hitherto unsuspected freedom lies in the continually changing subjective production of that which can only be guided, directed, cajoled and seduced from the outside, i.e. self-conduct. Here is the source of the Deleuzian dictum that “resistance is primary,” along with the corresponding theory of social control by “apparatuses of capture”—two ideas that have inspired much recent social theory. But instead of just celebrating the breakthrough that such ideas effectively represent, one could ask about the specific kinds of games that we have begun to play, in the age of the so-called new media.

The salient fact today is that our embrace, as a population, of miniaturized, networked electronic devices, has made us into avid producers of signals, emanating from all aspects of our psychic, sexual, professional, political and affective lives. These signals of belief and desire are eminently susceptible to interception, storage in databases, and transformation into statistics, which can be used as guidelines for the informed manipulation of our environment, and thus of our behavior. It then becomes important to know what kinds of social experiments we might be part of. And I will go further: it becomes important to produce counter-experiments, to raise the stakes of the game, to deploy the primacy of resistance in the key arenas of our epoch. This could be a worthwhile use for the relative autonomy of media museums, festivals, and educational programs, where art and science meet in the disconcerting forms of new technology. That is, it

could be, if participants can find the inventions, the critical discourses and the political will to assert their autonomy in the face of their funders—i.e. the state and the electronics industries.

D.I.Y Police

These experiments have to start on personal initiative, even if they can't end there. Consider the case of Jakob Boeskov and his pseudo-company "Empire North," which signed up in 2002 as the sole Danish exhibitor at "China Police 2002"—the first international security fair in the People's Republic. Empire North's unlikely product took the form of a prototype, advertised on a poster under the name *ID Sniper*. The poster, displayed at the empty stall that a trembling and uncertain Boeskov occupied at China Police 2002, contained this explanation:

"The idea is to implant a GPS microchip in the body of a human being, using a high-powered sniper rifle as the long distance injector ... At the same time, a digital camcorder with a zoom lens fitted within the scope will take a high-resolution picture of the target. This picture will be stored on a memory card for later image-analysis. GPS microchip technology is already being used for tracking millions of pets in various countries, and the logical solution is to use it on humans as well, when the situation demands it ..."²

The heart of this satirical proposal—the injectable miniature radio frequency ID tag—is quite real. It is known as the VeriChip (www.verichipcorp.com), and was initially marketed in different forms by a company called Applied Digital Solutions: "'VeriTrack" for continuous surveillance of mobile material and personnel; and "VeriGuard," an implanted, infra-cutaneous access badge which "cannot be forgotten, lost or stolen." Verification guaranteed. This bit of silicon and wire is a technology for producing effective truth. And as of October 13, 2004, it has been cleared by the American Food and Drug Administration for health-care use in the United States.

The chips are supposed to provide "easy access to individual medical records." But that apparently benign application could smooth the way for others, as is so often the case with surveillance technologies: "Applied Digital Solutions of Delray Beach, Fla., said that its devices, which it calls VeriChips, could save lives and limit injuries from errors in medical treatment. It hopes such medical uses will accelerate acceptance of under-the-skin ID chips as security and access-control devices." Of course, Old Europeans will rest assured that only the U.S. could condone such a barbaric idea, developed for control and security. On the Continent it is pure pleasure that provides the necessary legitimacy: "In March, the Baja Beach Club in Barcelona, Spain, began offering VeriChips to regular patrons who want to dispense with traditional identification and credit cards. About 50 'VIPs' have received the chip so far, according to a company spokesman, which allows them to link their identities to a payment system."³ One man's whiskey is as good as another man's medicine it seems—and both are sufficient excuses to get surveillance chips under our collective skin.

The disturbing thing is how easily such invasive technologies are accepted and made into norms. Under these conditions, the work of an artist like Boeskov becomes a rare chance to actually play the governance game, by opening up a public space for refusing, contesting and challenging these new tracking and recording regimes. To make such challenges effective on a broader scale, however, at least three requirements would have to be fulfilled. First, high-risk projects like *The ID Sniper* would have to be accepted as valid and ongoing experiments within

the new-media museums. Second, controversies around them would have to be produced, at the largest possible scale, and not only in the realms of discourse. And third, the artists involved would have to be defended, when their investigations of corporate and state experiments succeed in generating the all-too predictable repression.

Counter-Experiments in Public

The obvious critique of the more optimistic varieties of governance theory is that ordinary citizens have no imaginable possibility to accumulate the vast amounts of data that state and corporate actors hold on them. Their desires and usages may provide the vital thrust of an initial social transformation; but their subsequent expressions will unfold within freshly adjusted frameworks, to the point where “expression” itself comes to feel programmed, solicited and channeled by the manipulated environment. And of course, the procedures for stacking the deck of governmentality are nothing new. Nikolas Rose shows how the normalizing gaze of the psychological researcher comes to fall on earliest infancy, scrutinizing the gestures of the gurgling baby and recording them on film in order to produce abstracted and codified models of behavior. The cool efficiency of this gaze is one of the sources of intense alienation experienced by industrialized populations in the 1950s and 1960s, always unsure of which technocratic mirror may have been installed at the heart of their subjectivity.

A 1974 installation by the artist Dan Graham, under the title *Present Continuous Past(s)*, provides a public experience of this disturbing tension between fluid self-presence and the return of the technocratic gaze. We see our image in an ordinary mirror, where it is as mobile as life itself; but at the same time, and in the same mirror, we see a video device continually projecting a surveillance-camera recording from 8 seconds before, haunting our present experience and informing it with its own capture. The question of how one will play out this game between the spontaneity of the present and the recorded traces of the past is at the center of this paradigmatic artwork, which is nothing other than a meta-model of innumerable social experiments.

Reconsidering to what extent the feedback loops of governmentality became an issue in art, one would soon encounter Bruce Nauman, whose long-term obsession with behaviorism becomes explicit in a late installation like *Rats and Bats (On Learned Helplessness in Rats)*, from 1988. The piece takes the form of a yellow plastic labyrinth, with flickering video monitors in the place of the traditional bait that lures laboratory rats through the maze, and a soundtrack of painfully loud rock’n’roll drumming instead of the traditional electroshock. The commercial media are staged as the attractive and repulsive stimuli of a social experiment. But the pathos of Nauman’s art betrays all the melancholy of the objective and objectifying model; and it culminates in his anguished emphasis on a posture of “withdrawal,” which is precisely the syndrome that postwar industrial psychologists sought to cure in the alienated worker.

More interesting would be to look at all the phases that lead from the resurgence in the 1950s of concrete poetry—with its corporeal and respiratory foundation for direct human expression—through cut-up and montage procedures conceived against televisual continuity, to the dynamic interactions of the 1960s happenings and the political psychodrama of Oyvind Fahlström’s game-pieces, and then on to the early media work of an artist like Nam June Paik. These are just a few of the ways that artists engage in an active resistance to formatted behavior, and in a strategic channeling of alternatives—literally, in Paik’s case, with the famous satellite-relay video piece of 1973, entitled *Global Groove*.

The examples I’m quoting here are canonical, they are found in textbooks and in prestigious

white cubes. But they and many others could be used as a genealogy, leading through a history of twentieth-century art in its subtly or explicitly conflictual relation to what the sociologist Alain Touraine once called “the programmed society.” At stake is the capacity to respond with something other than an exhausted reflex. Art, no less than science, becomes emaciated when at least some of its practitioners do not engage in this shadow-boxing or open sparring with all the other forces that take such great interest in the potentials of our imagination. What has to be recovered today is the symbolic and practical antagonism that pits one kind of social experiment against another. This is the kind of game that can unfold within the computerized media, where the contemporary forms of data-gathering are practiced, and where the new control regimes are being imposed, through the use of truth-producing devices like the VeriChip. But an interesting conflict rarely just happens—particularly since contemporary art itself has now been normed, organized and channeled into the safe-havens of museums. The debate must be created, extended, deepened and resolved in public, where the issues themselves exist. But to project their most challenging work into the public realm, artists, scientists and activists also need the cultural, material, legal and moral support of specialized institutions.

The role of state-sponsored media-art centers and festivals today, in an age of intensified data-gathering and surveillance, should no longer be reduced to the *faux-naïve* combination of adolescent tinkering and corporate boosterism that still accounts for so much of their agenda. To earn the qualifier of “public,” institutions first have to recognize that the innermost private experience of entire populations is under attack, by capital and ideological interests that do not hesitate to retool the inventions of artists and scientists for deeply manipulative ends. The electronic media arts, in particular, are an arena where counter-experiments can be mounted, where technologies and their uses can be put on trial, where the feedback loops of surveillance systems can be made to flow in opposite directions. To be sure, all this requires the courage to imagine and realize a new kind of democratic institution, which imposes its autonomy not only in the ideal, contemplative realm, but instead, at grips with the working technologies of the social order. That may seem like a lot to ask, in an era of low intellectual ambitions and high-rolling corporate sponsorship. But is a peep-show into the pleasures and passions of glorified guinea pigs running the gauntlets of a 2.0 electronic labyrinth really all we can expect from the public sphere?

- 1 Nikolas Rose: *Governing the Soul*, 2nd edition, Free Association Books, London, 1999, p. xxiii.
- 2 See Boeskov's site at <http://backfire.dk/EMPIRENORTH/newsite>.
- 3 Both quotes in this paragraph are from the article “Identity Badge Worn Under Skin Approved for Use in Health Care,” *New York Times*, October 14, 2004.