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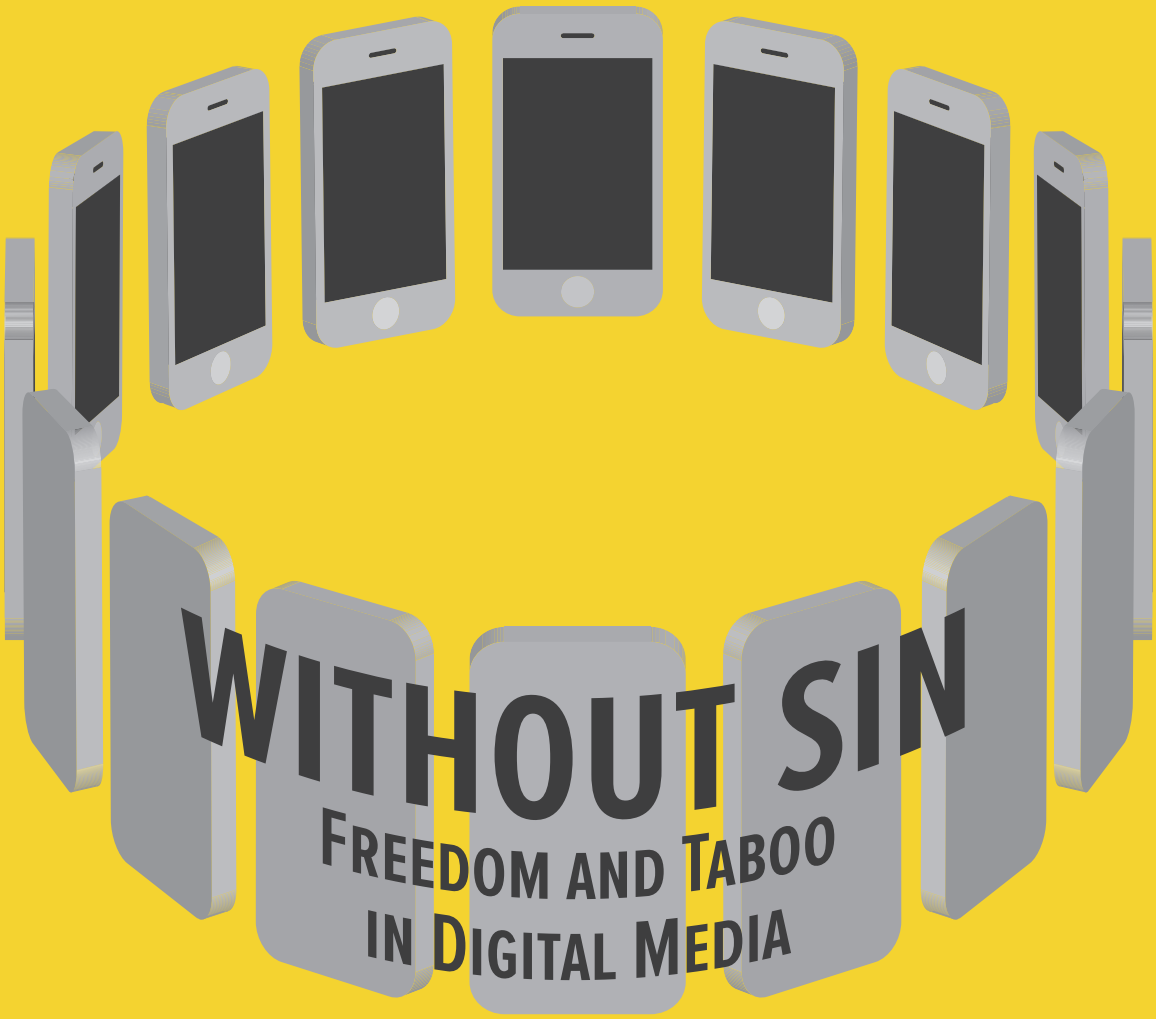
EDITORIAL MANAGERS **SHEENA CALVERT & ÖZDEN ŞAHİN**

What is the relationship between contemporary digital media and contemporary society? Is it possible to affirm that digital media are without sin and exist purely in a complex socio-political and economic context within which the users bring with them their ethical and cultural complexities? This issue, through a range of scholarly writings, analyzes the problems of ethics and sin within contemporary digital media frameworks.



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Without Sin: Freedom and Taboo in Digital Media

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LANFRANCO ACETI & DONNA LEISHMAN

EDITORIAL MANAGERS
SHEENA CALVERT & ÖZDEN ŞAHİN

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NSA: No Speaking Aloud, Anonymous, 2013.

Post-Society: Data Capture and Erasure One Click at a Time

"Oh, in the name of God! Now I know what it feels like to be God!"

Frankenstein (1931)

They must have felt like gods at the NSA when they discovered that they were able to spy on anyone. What feels ridiculous to someone that works with digital media is the level of ignorance that people continue to have about how much everyone else knows or can know about 'you.' If only people were willing to pay someone, or to spend a bit of time searching through digital data services themselves,they would discover a range of services that have started to commercialize collective data: bought and sold through a range of semi-public businesses and almost privatized governmental agencies. Public records of infractions and crimes are available for 'you' to know what 'your' neighbor has been up to.These deals, if not outright illegal, are characterized by unsolved ethical issues since they are a 'selling' of state documents that were never supposed to be so easily accessible to a global audience.

Concurrently as I write this introduction, I read that the maddened Angela Merkel is profoundly shocked that her mobile phone has been tapped into – this is naive at best but also deeply concerning: since to not understand what has happened politically and technologically in the 21st century one must have been living on the moon.Perhaps it is an act or a pantomimestagedfor the benefit of those 'common' people that need to continue living with the strong belief or faith that their lives are in good hands, that of the state.

Nevertheless it speaks of a 'madness' of the politician as a category. A madness characterized by an alienation from the rest of society that takes the form of isolation. This isolation is, in Foucauldian terms, none other than the enforcement of a voluntary seclusion in the prison and the mad house.

The prisons within which the military, corporate, financial and political worlds have shut themselves in speak increasingly of paranoia and fear. As such the voluntary prison within which they have sought refuge speaks more and more the confused language that one may have imagined to hear from the *Stultifera Navis*.

Paranoia, narcissism and omnipotence, all belong to the delirium of the sociopaths, [1] who push towards the horizon, following the trajectory set by the 'deranged minds.'

> *It is for the other world that the madman sets sail in his fools' boat; it is from the other world that he comes when he disembarks.* [2]

This otherworldliness – this being an alien from another world – has increasingly become the characteristic of contemporary political discourse, which, detached from the reality of the 'majority' of people, feeds into the godlike complex. Foolishness and lunacy reinforce this perspective, creating a rationale that drives the *Stultifera Navis* towards its destiny inexorably, bringing all others with them.

Having segregated themselves in a prison of their own doing, the politicians look at all others as being part of a large mad house. It is from the upper deck of a gilded prison that politicians stir the masses in the lower decks into a frenzy of fear and obedience.

> *Why should it be in this discourse, whose forms we have seen to be so faithful to the rules of reason, that we find all those signs which will most manifestly declare the very absence of reason?* [3]

Discourses, and in particular political discourses, no longer mask the reality of madness and with it the feeling of having become omnipotent talks of human madness in its attempt to acquire the impossible: that of being not just godlike, but God.

As omnipotent and omniscient gods the NSA should allow the state to 'see.'The reality is that the 'hands' of the state are no longer functional and have been substituted with prostheses wirelessly controlled by the sociopaths of globalized corporations. Theamputation of the hands happenedwhile the state itself was merrily looking somewhere else, tooblissfullybusy counting the money that was flowing through neo-capitalistic financial dreams of renewed prosperity and Napoleonic grandeur.

The madness is also in the discourse about data, deprived of ethical concerns and rootedwithinperceptions of both post-democracy and post-state.So much so that we could speak of a post-data society, within which the current post-societal existence is the consequence of profound changes and alterations to an ideal way of living that technology – as its greatest sin – still presents as participatory and horizontal but not as plutocratic and hierarchical.

In order to discuss the present post-societal condition, one would need first to analyze the cultural disregard that people have, or perhaps have acquired, for their personal data and the increasing lack of participation in the alteration of the frameworks set for post-data.

This disregard for personal data is part of cultural forms of concession and contracting that are determined and shaped not by rights but through the mass loss of a few rights in exchange for a) participation in a product as early adopters (Google), b) for design status and appearance (Apple), c) social conventions and entertainment (Facebook) and (Twitter).

Big data offers an insight into the problem of big losses if a catastrophe, accidental or intentional, should ever strike big databases. The right of ownership of the 'real object' that existed in the data-cloudwill become the new arena of post-data conflict. In this context of loss, if the crisis of the big banks has demonstrated anything, citizens will bear the brunt of the losses that will be spread iniquitously through 'everyone else.'

The problem is therefore characterized by multiple levels of complexity that can overall be referred to as a general problem of ethics of data, interpreted asthe ethical collection and usage of massive amounts of data. Also the ethical issues of post-data and their technologies has to be linked to a psychological understanding of the role that individuals play within society, both singularly and collectively through the use of media that engender new behavioral social systems through the access and usage of big data as sources of information.

Both Prof. Johnny Golding and Prof. Richard Gere present in this collection of essays two perspectives that, by looking at taboos and the sinful nature of technology, demand from the reader a reflection on

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the role that ethics plays or no longer plays within contemporary mediated societies.

Concepts of technological neutrality as well as economic neutrality have become enforced taboos when the experiential understanding is that tools that possess a degree of danger should be handled with a modicum of self-control and restraint.

The merging of economic and technological neutrality has generated corporate giants that have acquired a global stronghold on people's digital data. In the construction of arguments in favor or against a modicum of control for these economic and technological giants,the state and its political representatives have thus far considered it convenient not to side with the libertarian argument, since the control was being exercised on the citizen; a category to which politicians and corporate tycoons and other plutocrats and higher managers believe they do not belong to or want to be reduced to.

The problem is then not so much that the German citizens, or the rest of the world, were spied on. The taboo that has been infringed is that Angela Merkel, a head of state, was spied on. This implies an unwillingly democratic reduction from the NSA of all heads of state to 'normal citizens.' The disruption and the violated taboo is that all people are data in a horizontal structure that does not admit hierarchical distinctions and discriminations. In this sense perhaps digital data are violating the last taboo: anyone can be spied upon, creating a truly democratic society of surveillance.

The construction of digital data is such that there is not a normal, a superior, a better or a worse, but everything and everyone is reduced to data. That includes Angela Merkel and any other head of state. Suddenly the process of spying represents a welcome reduction to a basic common denominator: there is no difference between a German head of state or a blue collar worker; the NSA can spy on both and digital data are collected on both.

If anything was achieved by the NSA it was an egalitarian treatment of all of those who can be spied upon: a horizontal democratic system of spying that does not fear class, political status or money. This is perhaps the best enactment of American egalitarianism: we spy upon all equally and fully with no discrimination based on race, religion, social status, political affiliation or sexual orientation.

But the term spying does not quite manifest the profound level of Panopticon within which we happen to have chosen to live, by giving up and squandering inherited democratic liberties one right at a time, through one agreement at a time, with one click at a time.

These are some of the contemporary issues that this new LEA volume addresses, presenting a series of writings and perspectives from a variety of scholarly fields.

This LEA volume is the result of a collaboration with Dr. Donna Leishman and presents a varied number of perspectives on the infringement of taboos within contemporary digital media.

This issue features a new logo on its cover, that of New York University, Steinhardt School of Culture, Education, and Human Development.

My thanks to Prof. Robert Rowe, Professor of Music and Music Education; Associate Dean of Research and Doctoral Studies at NYU, for his work in establishing this collaboration with LEA.

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Özden Şahin has, as always, continued to provide valuable editorial support.

Lanfranco Aceti
Editor in Chief, Leonardo Electronic Almanac
Director, Kasa Gallery

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NSA: No Speaking Aloud, Anonymous, 2013.

Without Sin: Freedom and Taboo in Digital Media

INTRODUCTION

"Without Sin: Freedom and Taboo in Digital Media" is both the title of this special edition and the title of a panel that was held at ISEA 2011. The goal of the panel was to explore the disinhibited mind's ability to exercise freedom, act on desires and explore the taboo whilst also surveying the boarder question of the moral economy of human activity and how this is translates (or not) within digital media. The original panelists (some of whom have contributed to the this edition) helped to further delineate additional issues surrounding identity, ethics, human socialization and the need to better capture/understand/perceive how we are being affected by our technologies (for good or bad).

In the call for participation, I offered the view that contemporary social technologies are continuously changing our practical reality, a reality where human experience and technical artifacts have become beyond intertwined, but for many interwoven, inseparable – if this were to be true then type of cognizance (legal and personal) do we need to develop? Implied in this call is the need for both a better awareness and jurisdiction of these emergent issues. Whilst this edition is not (and could not be) a unified survey of human activity and digital media; the final edition contains 17 multidisciplinary papers spanning Law, Curation, Pedagogy, Choreography, Art History, Political Science, Creative Practice and Critical Theory – the volume attempts to illustrate the complexity of the situation and if possible the kinship between pertinent disciplines.

> *Human relationships are rich and they're messy and they're demanding. And we clean them up with technology. Texting, email, posting, all of these things let us present the self, as we want to be. We get to edit, and that means we get to delete, and that means we get to retouch, the face, the voice, the flesh, the body – not too little, not too much, just right.* [1]

Sherry Turkle's current hypothesis is that technology has introduced mechanisms that bypass traditional concepts of both community and identity indeed that we are facing (and some of us are struggling with) an array of reconceptualizations. Zygmunt Bauman in his essay "From Pilgrim to Tourist – or a Short History of Identity" suggests that:

> *One thinks of identity whenever one is not sure if where one belongs; that is, one is not sure how to place oneself among the evident variety if behavioral styles and patterns, and how to make sure that people would accept this placement as right and proper, so that both sides would know how to go on in each other's presence. 'Identity' is the name given to the escape sought from that uncertainty.* [2]

Our 'post-social' context where increased communication, travel and migration bought about by technological advances has only multiplied Bauman's conditions of uncertainty. Whilst there may be aesthetic tropes within social media, there is no universally accepted authority within contemporary culture nor is there an easy mutual acceptance of what is 'right and proper' after all we could be engaging in different iterations of "backward presence" or "forward presence" [3] whilst interacting with human and non-human alike (see Simone O'Callaghan's contribution: "Seductive Technologies and Inadvertent Voyeurs" for a further exploration of presence and intimacy).

Editing such a broad set of responses required an editorial approach that both allowed full expansion of each paper's discourse whilst looking for interconnections (and oppositions) in attempt to distil some commonalties. This was achieved by mentally placing citation, speculation and proposition between one another. Spilling the 'meaning' of the individual contributions into proximate conceptual spaces inhabited by other papers and looking for issues that overlapped or resonated allowed me formulate a sense of what might become future pertinent themes, and what now follows below are the notes from this process.

What Social Contract?

> *Hereby it is manifest that during the time men live without a common power to keep them all in awe, they are in that condition which is called war; and such a war as is of every man against every man.* (Thomas Hobbes in chapter XIII of the *Leviathan* [4])

Deborah Swack's "FEELTRACE and the Emotions (after Charles Darwin)," Johnny Golding's "Ana-Materialism & The Pineal Eye: Becoming Mouth-Breast" and Kriss Ravetto's "Anonymous Social As Political" argue that our perception of political authority is somewhere between shaky towards becoming erased altogether. Whilst the original 17th century rational for sublimating to a political authority – i.e. we'd default back to a war like state in the absence of a binding social contract – seems like a overwrought fear, the capacity for repugnant anti-social behavior as a consequence of no longer being in awe of any common power is real and increasingly impactful. [5] Problematically the notion of a government that has been created by individuals to protect themselves from one another sadly seems hopelessly incongruent in today's increasingly skeptical context. Co-joined to the dissipation of perceptible political entities – the power dynamics of being 'good' rather than 'bad' and or 'sinful' appears to be one of most flimsy of our prior social borders. The new reality that allows us to transgress and explore our tastes and predictions from a remote and often depersonalized position feels safer (i.e. with less personal accountability) a scenario that is a further exacerbated space vacated by the historic role of the church as a civic authority. Mikhail Pushkin in his paper "Do we need morality anymore?" explores the online moral value system and how this ties into the deleterious effect of the sensationalism in traditional mass media. He suggests that the absence of restrictive online social structure means the very consciousness of sin and guilt has now changed and potentially so has our capability of experiencing the emotions tied to guilt. [6] Sandra Wilson and Lila Gomez in their paper "The Premediation of Identity Management in Art & Design – New Model Cyborgs – Organic & Digital" concur stating that "the line dividing taboos from desires is often blurred, and a taboo can quickly flip into a desire, if the conditions under which that interaction take place change."

The Free?

The issue of freedom seems to be where much of the debate continues – between what constitutes false liberty and real freedoms. Unique in their own approach Golding's and Pushkin's papers challenge the premise that is implied in this edition's title – that 'Freedom and Taboo' even have a place at all in our contemporary existence as our established codes of morality (and ethics) have been radically reconfigured. This stance made me recall Hobbes's first treaty where he argued that "commodious living" (i.e. morality, politics, society), are purely conventional and that moral terms are not objective states of affairs but are reflections of tastes and preferences – indeed within another of his key concepts (i.e. the "State of Nature") 'anything goes' as nothing is immoral and or unjust. [6] It would 'appear' that we are freer from traditional institutional controls whilst at the same time one could argue that the borders of contiguous social forms (i.e.

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procedures, networks, our relationship to objects and things) seem to have dissipated alongside our capacity to perceive them. The problematic lack of an established conventional commodious living such as Bauman's idea that something is 'right and proper' is under challenge by the individualized complexity thrown up from our disinhibited minds, which can result in benign or toxic or 'other' behaviors depending on our personality's variables. [7] Ravetto describes how Anonymous consciously inhabits such an 'other' space:

> *Anonymous demonstrates how the common cannot take on an ethical or coherent political message. It can only produce a heterogeneity of spontaneous actions, contradictory messages, and embrace its contradictions, its act of vigilante justice as much as its dark, racist, sexist, homophobic and predatory qualities.*

Perception

Traditionally good cognition of identity/society/relationships (networks and procedures) was achieved through a mix of social conditioning and astute mindfulness. On the other hand at present the dissipation of contiguous social forms has problematized the whole process creating multiple social situations (new and prior) and rather than a semi-stable situation (to reflect upon) we are faced with a digital deluge of unverifiable information. Perception and memory comes up in David R. Burns's paper "Media, Memory, and Representation in the Digital Age: Rebirth" where he looks at the problematic role of digital mediation in his personal experience of the 9/11. He recalls the discombobulating feeling of being: "part of the digital media being internationally broadcast across the world." Burns seeks to highlight the media's influence over an individual's constructed memories. From a different perspective Charlie Gere reminds us of the prominence (and shortcomings) of our ocular-centric perspective in his discussion of "Alterity, Pornography, and the Divine" and cites Martin Jay's essay "Scopic Regimes of Modernity" [8] which in turn explores a variety of significant core concepts of modernity where vision and knowledge meet and influence one another. Gere/Jay's line of references resurrect for the reader Michel Foucault's notion of the "Panopticon" (where surveillance is diffused as a principle of social organization), [9] Guy DeDord's *The Society of the Spectacle* i.e. "All that once was directly lived has become mere representation") [10] and Richard Rorty's *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (published in 1979). [11] The latter gave form to an enduringly relevant question: are we overly reliant on a representational theory of perception? And how does this intersect with the risks associated with solipsistic introjection within non face-to-face online interactions? The ethics of 'looking' and data collection is also a feature of Deborah Burns's paper "Differential Surveillance of Students: Surveillance/Sousveillance Art as Opportunities for Reform" in which Burns asks questions of the higher education system and its complicity in the further erosion of student privacy. Burn's interest in accountability bridges us back to Foucault's idea of panoptic diffusion:

> *He who is subjected to a field of visibility, and who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power; he makes them play spontaneously upon himself; he inscribes in himself the power relation in which he simultaneously plays both roles; he becomes the principle of his own subjection* [12]

In panoptic diffusion the knowingness of the subject is key – as we move towards naturalization of surveillance and data capture through mass digitization such power relationships change. This is a concern mirrored by Eric Schmidt Google's Executive Chairman when considering the reach of our digital footprints: "I don't believe society understands what happens when everything is available, knowable and recorded by everyone all the time." [13] Smita Kheria's "Copyright and Digital Art practice: The 'Schizophrenic' Position of the Digital Artist" and Alana Kushnir's "When Curating Meets Piracy: Rehashing the History of Unauthorised Exhibition-Making" explore accountability and power relationships in different loci whilst looking at the mitigation of creative appropriation and reuse. It is clear that in this area serious reconfigurations have occurred and that new paradigms of acceptability (often counter to the legal reality) are at play.

Bauman's belief that "One thinks of identity whenever one is not sure if where one belongs" [14] maybe a clue into why social media have become such an integral part of modern society. It is after all an activity that privileges 'looking' and objectifying without the recipient's direct engagement – a new power relationship quite displaced from traditional (identity affirming) social interactions. In this context of social media over dependency it may be timely to reconsider Guy-Ernest Debord's 'thesis 30':

> *The externality of the spectacle in relation to the active man appears in the fact that his own gestures are no longer his but those of another who represents them to him. This is why the spectator feels at home nowhere, because the spectacle is everywhere.* [15]

Underneath these issues of perception / presence / identity / is a change or at least a blurring in our political (and personal) agency. Don Ritter's paper "Content Osmosis and the Political Economy of Social Media" functions as a reminder of the historical precedents and continued subterfuges that occur in mediated feelings of empowerment. Whilst Brigit Bachler in her paper "Like Reality" presents to the reader that "besides reality television formats, social networking sites such as Facebook have successfully delivered a new form of watching each other, in a seemingly safe setting, on a screen at home" and that "the appeal of the real becomes the promise of access to the reality of manipulation." [16] The notion of better access to the 'untruth' of things also appears in Ravetto's paper "Anonymous: Social as Political" where she argues that "secrecy and openness are in fact aporias." What is unclear is that, as society maintains its voyeuristic bent and the spectacle is being conflated into the banality of social media, are we becoming occluded from meaningful developmental human interactions? If so, we are to re-create a sense of agency in a process challenged (or already transformed) by clever implicit back-end data gathering [17] and an unknown/undeclared use our data's mined 'self.' Then, and only then, dissociative anonymity may become one strategy that allows us to be more independent; to be willed enough to see the world from our own distinctive needs whilst devising our own extensions to the long genealogy of moral concepts.

Somewhere / Someplace

Perpetual evolution and sustained emergence is one of the other interconnecting threads found within the edition. Many of the authors recognize a requirement for fluidity as a reaction to the pace of change. Geographer David Harvey uses the term "space-time compression" to refer to "processes that . . . revolutionize the objective qualities of space and time." [18] Indeed there seems to be consensus in the edition that we are 'in' an accelerated existence and a concomitant dissolution of traditional spatial co-ordinates – Swack cites Joanna Zylinska's 'human being' to a perpetual "human becoming" [19] whilst Golding in her paper reminds us that Hobbes also asserted that "[f]or seeing life is but a motion of Limbs" [20] and that motion, comes from motion and is inextricably linked to the development and right of the individual. But Golding expands this changing of state further and argues where repetition (and loop) exist so does a different experience:

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The usual culprits of time and space (or time as distinct from space and vice versa), along with identity, meaning, Existenz, Being, reconfigure via a relational morphogenesis of velocity, mass, and intensity. This is an immanent surface cohesion, the compelling into a 'this' or a 'here' or a 'now,' a space-time terrain, a collapse and rearticulation of the tick-tick-ticking of distance, movement, speed, born through the repetitive but relative enfolding of otherness, symmetry and diversion.

Golding's is a bewildering proposition requiring a frame of mind traditionally fostered by theoretical physicists but one that may aptly summarize the nature of the quandary. The authors contributing to this edition all exist in their own ways in a post-digital environment, anthropologist Lucy Suchman describes this environment as being "the view from nowhere, detached intimacy, and located accountability." [21] Wilson and Gomez further offer a possible coping strategy by exploring the usefulness of Jay Bolter and Richard Grusin's "pre-mediation" as a means to externalize a host of fears and reduce negative emotions in the face of uncertainty. The imperative to create some strategies to make sense of some of these pressing issues is something that I explore in my own contribution in which I offer the new term *Precarious Design* – as a category of contemporary practice that is emerging from the design community. Precarious Design encompasses a set of practices that by expressing current and near future scenarios are well positioned to probe deeper and tease out important underlying societal assumptions to attain understanding or control in our context of sustained cultural and technological change.

Embodiment

In theory our deterritorialized and changed relationship with our materiality provides a new context in which a disinhibited mind could better act on desires and explore the taboo. Ken Hollings's paper "THERE MUST BE SOMETHING WRONG WITH THIS, SALLY... Faults, lapses and imperfections in the sex life of machines" – presents a compelling survey of the early origin of when humans began to objectify and try live through our machines starting with disembodiment of voice as self that arose from the recording of sound via the Edison phonograph in 1876. Golding and Swack mull over the implications of the digital on embodiment and what it means now to be 'human' as we veer away from biological truth and associated moral values towards something else. Sue Hawksley's "Dancing on the Head of a Sin: touch, dance and taboo" reminds us of our sensorial basis in which:

Touch is generally the least shared, or acknowledged, and the most taboo of the senses. Haptic and touch-screen technologies are becoming ubiquitous, but although this makes touch more commonly experienced or shared, it is often reframed through the virtual, while inter-personal touch still tends to remain sexualized, militarized or medicalized (in most Western cultures at least).

Within her paper Hawksley provides an argument (and example) on how the mediation of one taboo – dance – through another – touch – could mitigate the perceived moral dangers and usual frames of social responsibility. Swack raises bioethical questions about the future nature of life for humans and "the embodiment and containment of the self and its symbiotic integration and enhancement with technology and machines." Whilst Wilson and Gomez's go on to discuss *Bioprescence* by Shiho Fukuhara and Georg Tremmel – a project that provocatively "creates Human DNA trees by transcoding the essence of a human being within the DNA of a tree in order to create 'Living Memorials' or 'Transgenic Tombstones'" [22] – as an example of a manifest situation that still yields a (rare) feeling of transgression into the taboo.

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CONCLUSION

In the interstices of this edition there are some questions/observations that remain somewhat unanswered and others that are nascent in their formation. They are listed below as a last comment and as a gateway to further considerations.

Does freedom from traditional hierarchy equate to empowerment when structures and social boundaries are also massively variable and dispersed and are pervasive to the point of incomprehension/invalidation? Or is there some salve to be found in Foucault's line that "'Power is everywhere' and 'comes from everywhere' so in this sense is neither an agency nor a structure," [23] thus nothing is actually being 'lost' in our current context? And is it possible that power has always resided within the individual and we only need to readjust to this autonomy?

Conventional political power (and their panoptic strategies) seem to be stalling, as efforts to resist and subvert deep-seated and long-held governmental secrecy over military/intelligence activities have gained increased momentum while their once privileged data joins in the leaky soft membrane that is the ethics of sharing digitally stored information.

Through dissociative strategies like online anonymity comes power re-balance, potentially giving the individual better recourse to contest unjust actions/laws but what happens when we have no meaningful social contract to direct our civility? Its seems pertinent to explore if we may be in need of a new social contract that reconnects or reconfigures the idea of accountability – indeed it was interesting to see the contrast between Suchman's observed 'lack of accountability' and the Anonymous collective agenda of holding (often political or corporate) hypocrites 'accountable' through punitive measures such as Denial-of-Service attacks.

Regarding de-contextualization of the image / identity – there seems to be something worth bracing oneself against in the free-fall of taxonomies, how we see, how we relate, how we perceive, how we understand that even the surface of things has changed and could still be changing. There is no longer a floating signifier but potentially an abandoned sign in a cloud of dissipating (or endlessly shifting) signification. Where once:

The judges of normality are present everywhere. We are in the society of the teacher-judge, the doctor-judge, the educator-judge, the 'social-worker'-judge; it is on them that the universal reign of the normative is based; and each individual, wherever he may find himself, subjects to it his body, his gestures, his behaviour, his aptitudes, his achievements. [24]

There now is no culturally specific normal in the diffuse digital-physical continuum, which makes the materiality and durability of truth very tenuous indeed; a scenario that judges-teaches-social workers are having some difficulty in addressing and responding to in a timely manner, an activity that the theoretically speculative and methodologically informed research as contained within this edition can hopefully help them with.

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EDITORIAL

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NSA: No Speaking Aloud, Anonymous, 2013.

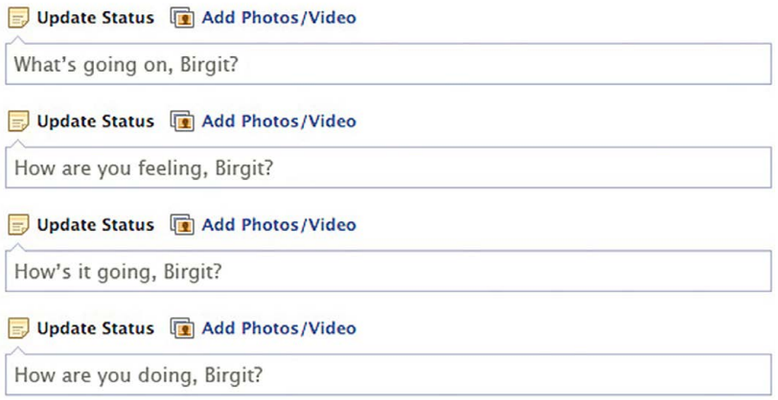

Figure 1. Facebook Status Update Forms, 2012, by Facebook.com, Form Field Website. Scren grab. © Birgit Bachler, 2012. Used with permission.

LIKE REALITY

by

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INTRODUCTION

"How's it going, Birgit?"... "How are you feeling, Birgit?"... "What are you doing, Birgit?"... "What's going on, Birgit?"

The friendly-looking text box at the top of the home page of my Facebook profile reminds me to keep my 'Timeline' moving. This Timeline is, supposedly, the story of my online life – a narrative, which I am performing in an ongoing global-reality show. Like a participant in some reality-television format, I have entered into an agreement with a company to take part in their show, understanding that parts of my private life will become visible to a public audience, and knowing that the company will make a business profit from my participation. But in this case, no cameras are aimed at me, and there is no director or editor to 'spice up' my plot – rather, I have been given a tool which enables me to create my own narrative while following the narratives of others, all within the rules and guidelines handed down by the company.

Meanwhile, on television, reality shows are airing in prime time, offering a broader form of surveillance-based entertainment: from 'docusoaps' about housewives, party people, daredevils and fortune hunters, to game shows and talent shows promising their participants celebrity status or show-business careers.

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A B S T R A C T

In an information economy that is built upon participatory surveillance-based entertainment, we are simultaneously acting as consumers and producers of our very own, personal mediated realities. Besides reality television formats, social networking sites such as Facebook have successfully delivered a new form of watching each other, in a seemingly safe setting, on a screen at home. But our narratives online are not only part of a global reality show, in which we perform for invisible human audiences – we are also being closely watched by the machines that meticulously record our actions and add them to their databases. We are moving in a continuous feedback loop of the surveillance-entertainment industry that we have positioned ourselves in, which constitutes our subjectivity as both performer and critic in a spectacle staged by technology.

Social networks and reality television shows are both prominent contemporary tools of participatory surveillance. In this paper I shall discuss how invisible rules, scripts and filters are being used to turn the everyday into a spectacle, and how we are participating in an economy of surveillance-based entertainment, where the boundaries between what is 'fake' and what is 'real' are blurred to the point of insignificance, and where our data is being used to fuel a global reality-TV production.

REALITY, ROLLING

A phenomenon which originally started by filming rather innocent pranks played on unprepared participants (*Candid Camera*, in the late 1940s) has developed into a booming entertainment industry, spewing into our living rooms hours upon hours of reality programming. It seems as though there is now no social experiment, no dangerous adventure, no childhood dream, no career opportunity which not yet been transformed into some reality-television format.

> *Many reality formats maintain noticeable connections to the documentary tradition. In particular, the use of handheld cameras and lack of narration found in many reality programs is reminiscent of observational documentaries and carries with it an implicit reference to the form's original promise to provide direct access to the experience of the observed subject. This has the effect of bolstering some of reality TV's claims to 'the real.'* [1]

Reality television promises us non-scripted access to 'real' people, a phenomenon that Oulette and Laurie described as the 'entertaining real.' [2] In 2000, the first season of *Big Brother* was broadcast in the United States. We may well wonder: how 'entertaining' and how 'real' is a television show concept that puts a group of people together in a house, isolated from the outside world and continuously watched by cameras? 24/7 web access to the cameras installed in the *Big Brother* house allowed viewers to watch non-edited

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footage streamed live from the set – which in a sense boosted *Big Brother*'s claims of realism. As Mark Andrejevic puts it: "The appeal of the real becomes the promise of access to the reality of manipulation." [3] Thus the viewers who also followed the narrative online could compare the unedited material with the footage selected by the producers for the prime-time television broadcast. To once again quote Andrejevic: "The manipulative character of prime-time programming is conceded and simultaneously portrayed as a given and unchangeable feature of the medium." [4]

The inhabitants of the *Big Brother* house are aware of the existence of the cameras, and of the possibility of being watched at all times. Slavoj Žižek states that, on reality television shows, "what we see there are fictional characters, even if they play themselves for the real [sic]." [5] So once we are placed on a stage and asked to behave authentically and naturally, knowing that we are being watched, we are no longer ourselves – we become actors performing ourselves.

Andrejevic points out that the term 'Reality TV' is a misnomer, perhaps even an oxymoron. [6] But he also states that, in the case of *Big Brother*, access to the online feeds makes it possible for savvy viewers to see for themselves how the producers of the show construct reality. The Internet stream, as an extra feature to the edited and broadcast selection of recorded material, seemed to exemplify in some sense the promise of the Internet as an alternative to the dominant mass media. Suddenly the audience could pick the images they wanted to see – the technology for experiencing television-like entertainment was now in their hands. [7]

15 MINUTES

Already in 1996, the website Jennicam.com seemed to single-handedly demonstrate the 'revolutionary' potential of the Internet. Jennifer Ringley's webcam show attracted millions of fans, embodying the promise that the Internet could be used to put the means of media production in the hands of the people. [8]

At the age of 21 Ringley has started streaming live video from her college dorm on jennicam.org. As described in the FAQ her website features "simply, pictures of us, doing whatever we're doing. I don't sing or dance or do tricks (okay, actually I do, but not very well and solely for my own amusement, not *for* the cameras). By the same token, JenniCam is almost entirely unedited and uncensored." [9] This unedited and uncensored reality featured imagery of a young woman's mundane life, including nudity and sex.

In 1999, the Internet pioneer Josh Harris experimented with a surveillance-based future in his art project *Quiet: We Live in Public*. 100 volunteers were placed in an underground "pod hotel" in New York City, and constantly surrounded by cameras that followed their everyday actions. Each participant's bunk was also fitted with a camera and a television screen where participants could switch between the project's live channels. In this synoptic setup, participants were simultaneously each other's performers and audience: "Andy Warhol was wrong, his view was that people wanted 15 minutes of fame in their lifetime, our view is that people want 15 minutes of fame every day." [10] The experiment was based on the absence of any form of privacy, facilitating maximum surveillance by turning even the most private spaces into public ones: the hotel's only shower was placed in a transparent dome in the middle of the living space, and all the walls between the toilets were removed. By the time the project was forced to shut down after about a month, participants had started developing aggressive behavior against each other and against the cameras,

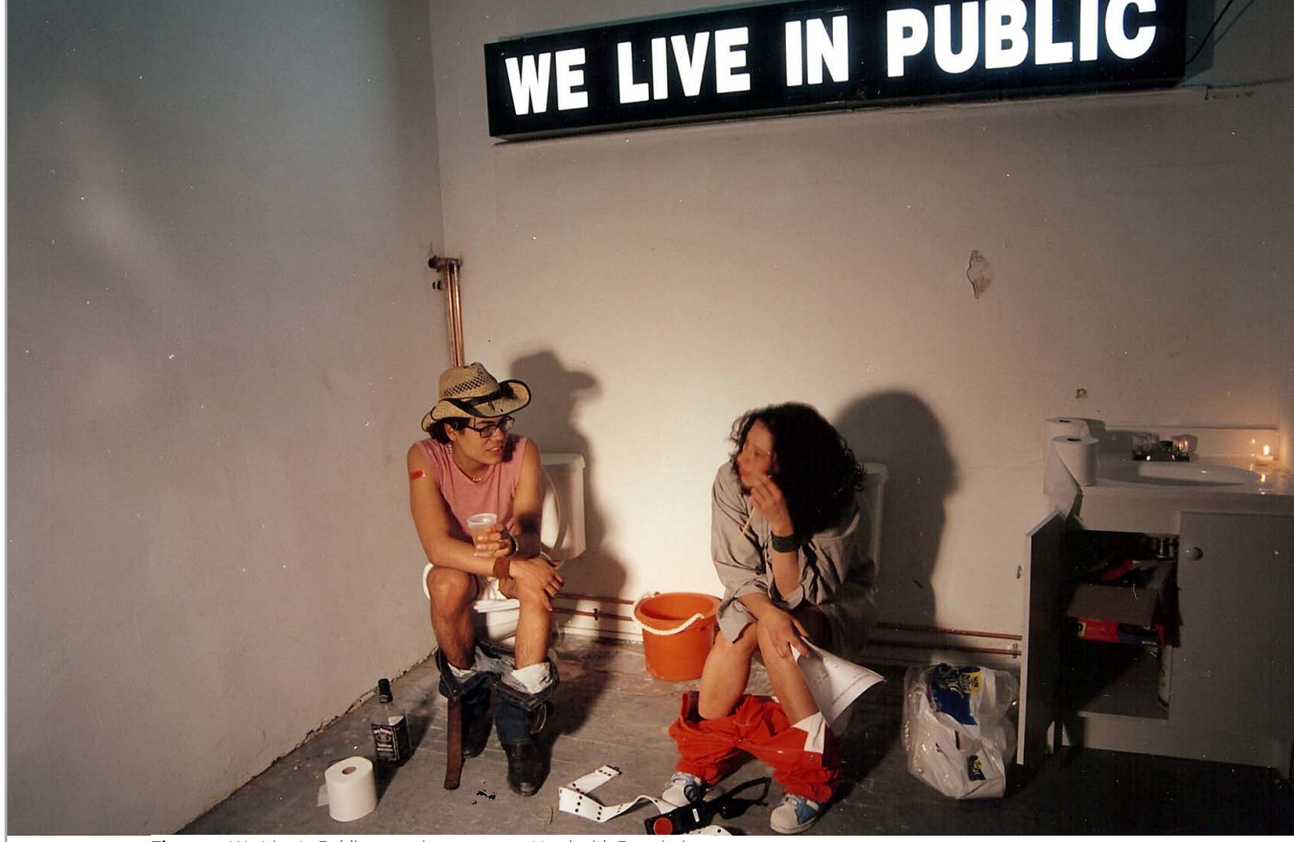

Figure 2. *We Live In Public*, press image, 2009. Used with Permission.

and were suffering from acute loneliness – despite the constant closeness to others. "The more you know about each other, the more lonely you become." [11]

Harris's comment on his own experiment may suggest that, in order to retain a healthy relationship with each other, we must avoid confrontation with unedited reality. This is perhaps why webcam sites such as Justin.tv or Ustream.tv (both launched in 2007), based on the possibility of round-the-clock webcasting, remain a fringe phenomenon in today's social networking culture. Broadcasters create a live stream on the website, users can watch the stream, and registered users can interact with the broadcaster via a chat window. Unlike social networking sites such as Facebook or LinkedIn, which encourage their users to connect with people they already know, these sites facilitate encounters between strangers. When switching through Justin.tv's 'social' channels, the 'reality' one encounters consists mostly of bored-looking females sitting in front of their computers. If we were to be watching 'real lives' all the time, this is probably the setting we could expect: someone else looking at a screen.

A more playful approach towards participatory surveillance using webcams was that of the website Chatroulette (launched in 2009), a web-based chat site where the webcam streams of random strangers are paired with each other. At any point, either party may choose to end the chat, at which point both users get connected to another random user. The novelty hype surrounding the Chatroulette concept and its contribution to online culture – fulfilling the promise of being able to connect to 'real' people around the world – came to an end when an excess of inappropriate content forced the site to change its terms of service, so that now only registered users are able to use Chatroulette.

HELLO, SUPERPANOPTICON

When considering the popularity of social networking sites in parallel to the ongoing success of reality television shows, we should note that the type of surveillance we find on popular social networking sites such as Facebook is not based on content collected by the lens of a camera/webcam. Rather, the material used

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to construct the online reality narrative is our personal data, accumulated in huge databases which provide the material for the 'performance' of our online body of data. Such representations of our lives in database form have been described using a variety of terms, ranging from Sherry Turkle's "second self" (1984) [12] to Gilles Deleuze's "dividual" [13] (1992) and Philip Agre's "digital shadow" (1994). [14]

On social networking sites, we fill these databases on a voluntary basis with information about ourselves – by sharing texts, links, pictures and videos with our contacts within our network.

Already in the 1990s, Mark Poster commented on how we are transitioning towards an information economy, in which we are increasingly being policed by databases, and how we come to accept this state of affairs as the norm:

> *The population participates in its own self-constitution as subjects of the normalizing gaze of the Superpanopticon. We see databases not as an invasion of privacy, as a threat to a centered individual, but as the multiplication of the individual, the constitution of an additional self, one that may be acted upon to the detriment of the 'real' self without that 'real' self ever being aware of what is happening.* [15]

The crowd is 'producing' itself, within a platform's given set of rules. Online social networking sites represent a theater where we can 'perform ourselves,' but they are also a tool which we can use to watch others perform and instantly interact with them, in public or in private. Steve Rushton states that self-performance is an essential aspect of our leisure time, and that we need this self-performance if we are to be a part of any particular discourse within the economy of information. [16] A social network can therefore be seen as an interface or portal for everyday self-performance.

This self-performance is facilitated by the users who are willing to add content to the databases of social networking sites, as well as the scripts that turn this content into a consumable flow of information. On social networking sites, our performance is already formatted in such a way that it can be interpreted not only by a human, but also by a machine audience.

FACEBOOK.TV

"When performing in networked publics, people are forced to contend with invisible audiences and engage in acts of impression management even when they have no idea how their performances are being perceived." [17]

As we tell our stories on Facebook, by filling in forms and clicking buttons, scripts are invisibly being woven into our narratives, managing our online perception of the 'entertaining real.'

Users logging into Facebook are immediately shown a 'News Feed' featuring the latest stories posted by their friends. This feed can be sorted either by 'Most Recent' or by 'Top Stories' – and this is the point where the scripts start taking over each individual user's personal viewing experience. While the first query is obvious – namely, displaying the latest posts in chronological order – the algorithms that determine what may be considered a 'Top Post' are more complex. According to Facebook, 'Top Stories' are selected based on the reader's relationship with the person who posted the story, the number of comments and likes the story received, and what type of story (post, comment, 'like,' etc.) it is. Thus, the more users share information about themselves and their relationship with their connections, the more accurately the scripts will be able to determine the relevance of the content. Also, to make these algorithms more effective, we are able to 'hide' items or people from the 'News Feed' in order to teach the scripts who and what we actually wish to see.

Besides the settings that allow us – in our role as viewer, or voyeur – to determine how we want to perceive Facebook, we are also able to define how we wish to be seen by others. In order to let Facebook's scripts assist us in reaching the right audiences, we must customize our 'Privacy Settings.' These settings, which have changed considerably during the course of the platform's development, currently allow users to define default audiences for the items they share. Interestingly, since the introduction of the new 'Timeline' profile, which displays all Facebook events in chronological order, users are now able to retroactively manage the visibility of their posts. Thus, on Facebook we can act as the editors as well as the performers of our own narrative. We can highlight items we want others to see, but we can also secretly hide the unwanted parts of our story, in order to keep our narrative going according to how we want to present ourselves to our various audiences. The scripts generate customized stories of us, depending on what we are willing to share and what others are interested in seeing.

The human audience may not be able to see the process of how we construct our Facebook reality show – but Facebook, as a company, learns a lot about its users as self-performing subjects, and about how to motivate them to keep on building their online narrative using Facebook.

Strikingly, Facebook's scripts work hard to make the platform seem like a cozy environment, where people are invited to connect and share their good stories and happy feelings with their friends – 'unfriending' someone, the act of deleting that person from the list of friends, is not included in the stream of stories. Likewise, actions of undoing a 'like' or removing a post, photo, comment or tag are left out of the narrative. The underlying scripts of the platform actively encourage its users' constant demand of impression management. We are encouraged to 'like' things, to share items, and to add 'people we may know' to our circle of friends.

The feedback on our performance comes in the form of 'likes,' 'shares' and 'comments' from our audience. In order to remain visible and to get featured in the 'Top Stories,' we are entirely dependent on the feedback of our audience. This fuels the performer's craving for attention: if we want to be liked, we have to post likeable content.

Figure 3. Facebook 'Like' Button, May 2013, Facebook.com, Form Field Website. © Birgit Bachler, 2013. Used with Permission.

Abusive content is not welcome: nudity or other sexually suggestive content is removed by Facebook, as is hate speech, threats or direct attacks against individuals or groups, and content that depicts bullying or excessive violence. With its 'community standards' Facebook tries to create rules for a global social space, "to balance the needs and interests of a global population." [18]

Besides adapting our online selves to the norms of our global invisible audiences, we are also required to interface with the binary character of the database entries that constitute our online existence – and we need to accept that we can never be sure of who is actually seeing all our efforts. Despite the environment's endlessly

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comforting appearance, the fear of overexposure on Facebook is omnipresent. Every bit of precarious personal data stored in Facebook's databases can possibly go public, when the interface of Facebook is updated. The introduction of the new profile "Timeline" in 2010 was met by a large outcry of Facebook users who believed that a bug had caused that earlier private messages suddenly appeared publicly on their profiles. Instead, what they were really confronted with was how their own manner of sharing private content on Facebook had dramatically changed over time, and how a change of the interface could suddenly reveal intimate details to an unknown public. We must deal with an ever-changing form of celebrity status, and constantly review new changes to the platform in order to determine whether they may conflict with our perception of openness.

In contrast to social networking sites, reality television shows are not about coziness and making friends – rather, they seek to entertain their audiences by stimulating conflict, evoking emotions, and creating challenging environments for their participants. The entertainment industry does not comply with 'global community standards.' The scripts of reality television shows seem to embrace, often even to instigate, unintended exposure, whereas on Facebook the scripts are closely tied to the participant's desire for privacy.

CONCLUSION

Both reality television and social networking sites offer a form of surveillance-based entertainment, with a promise of being able to observe 'the real.' Whether this form of 'real' is recorded with a camera or stored in databases, the reality we are shown when we watch the spectacle on our screens is inevitably a mediated one.

When we participate – thus exposing ourselves to an invisible audience in a networked performance – we become celebrities living their lives in public, constantly aware of the possible presence of an audience.

Scripts are in place to keep the narratives running and the audiences entertained. But Facebook needs to keep the performers within its surveillance environment entertained as well, by offering them customizable privacy settings and allowing for an entertaining consumption of other people's content. When Facebook claims that its 'Year in Review' feature is able to determine each user's '20 biggest moments from the year,' it means that the scripts will generate their own interpretation of our performance, based on our data. [19]

We are afraid to reveal too much of ourselves to each other and to the machines, and we refrain from breaking taboos when we are supposed to be playing along on a social surveillance stage; where the databases record and store our innermost expressions. Often, the system's underlying scripts determine how visible we are to others, and whether we can react to them. Invisible filters make choices that are not always clear – the content's curatorship, and therefore its censorship, remain obfuscated from our view.

The process of production and consumption of mediated realities – and simultaneously, the production and consumption of our subjectivity – are dynamically interacting and interfering with each other in a seemingly endless feedback loop: we are sitting at home, participating in an information economy in which we consume mediated realities from the screen and produce our own mediated realities for the databases. And as 'reality' is continuously being consumed online and on television, we go on training the machines, showing them how to produce subjectivity – and, perhaps, how to script life stories, without even the necessity of a 'real' person having ever lived that life. ■

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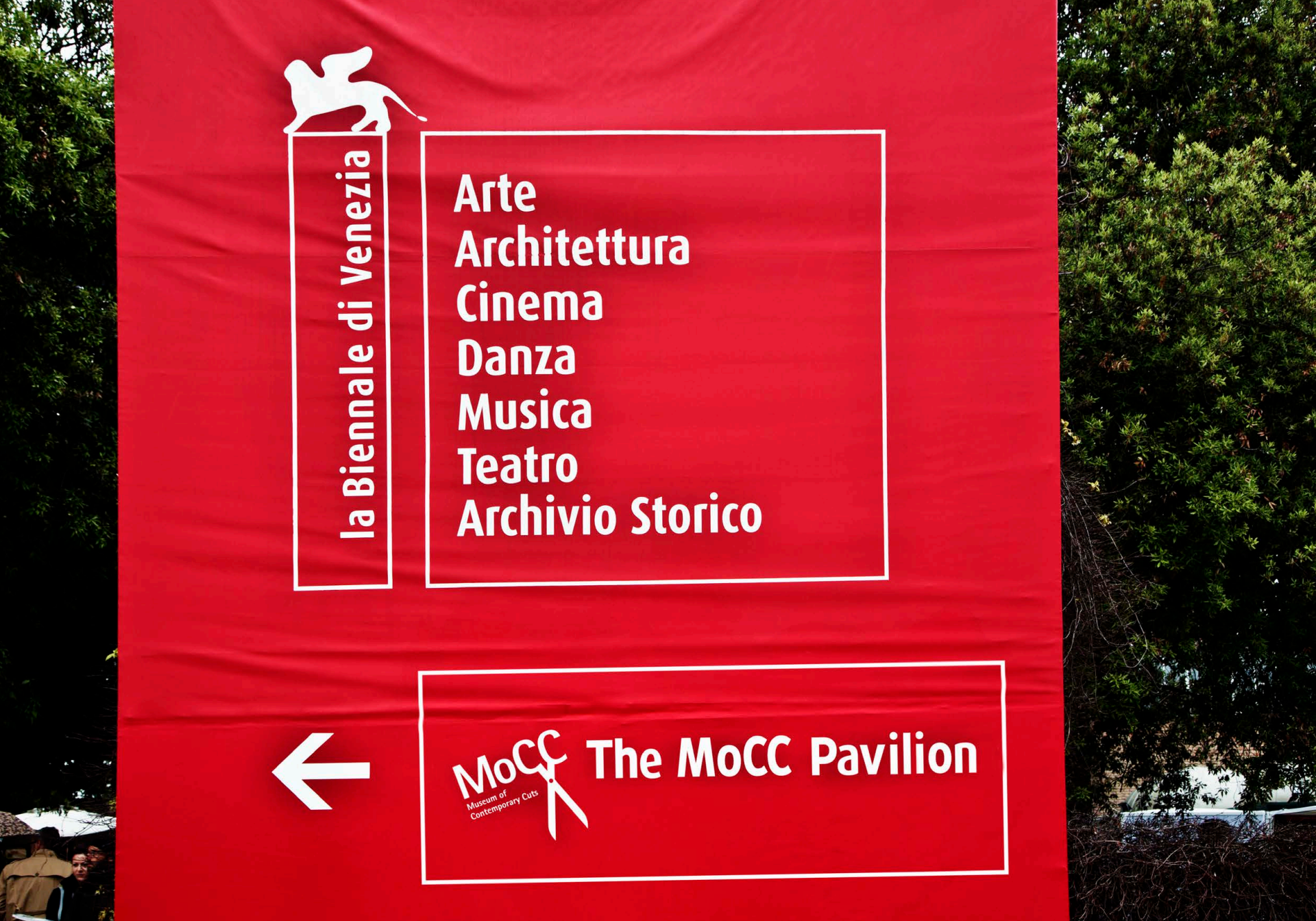
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