

UNCERTAIN AESTHETICS: NETWORKS IN THE AGE OF EMERGING TECHNOLOGY

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In approaching our thoughts about "Uncertain Aesthetics: Networks in the Age of Emerging Technology," we understand uncertain aesthetics to be a critical component in the performative spaces between contemporary conceptions of networks. The surge of digital accumulation, the continual surprise of informational texture and the layers of expressive multiplicity are what lend networks their creative power - as networks interface both real and virtual spaces in public and in private. We are attracted in our curatorial and artistic work to projects that capitalize on the expansiveness of the digital and that confront the user with the realities, thinking here of Maria Miranda's exciting project of undisciplined knowledge (2009). Undisciplined, that is, as we embrace it from within the legacy of interactivity, a practice that both solicits the user to respond to a set of predetermined choices and gives itself over to the users' momentary stages, creating works and archives whose algorithms and structures leave them incomplete.

In our work we have drawn upon our reliance on artists and theoretical principles of uncertainty as they have shaped our collaborations in research, curating, and creativity to shape this presentation. Tim, a curator of new media and critical theorist, and Renate, a conceptual artist mining the fields of the public and private within the creative folds of old and new technologies, collaborate on joint projects that are framed by emergent technologies in dialogue with the layered tapestry of culture, theory, and art. Collaboratively our interventions through the Rose Goldsen Archive of New Media Art <http://www.goldsen.library.cornell.edu/> or The Tinker Factory <http://www.tinkerfactory.net/> both at Cornell University or through our curating of the –empyre- new media listserv <http://www.empyre.cornell.library.edu>, we combine technological and archival platforms while relying on unsettling, contemporary understandings of aesthetics, psychoanalysis, memory and fantasy. (We might add that –empyre- soft-skinned space is currently discussing the topic we enlist during the month of September <http://lists.cofa.unsw.edu.au/pipermail/empyre/>). Key to our shared interests is the shuttling back and forth between the public and private spheres of the archive, as the archive takes on greater weight in networked culture and as networked culture destabilizes the certainty of the archive's relation to aesthetics. As we use the archive, it is a rhizomatic relational structure that ebbs and flows in relationship to those who engage it.

To some extent, this is not something new to digital culture. The archive, Foucault wrote as early as 1969, is the horizon of "enoncés" marked by their "thickness of accumulation" which never ceases "to modify, to change, to disturb, to upset, and sometimes to demolish" (Foucault, 1969, 164). Such multi-layered thickness, which we might envision today as a fractal conglomeration of accumulated data, is what constitutes the lively energetics of the archive's erasure of previous notions of stability and certainty. Rather than grounding the specter of erasure in conventions of archival legibility, we are drawn to the expansiveness of the digital event's confrontation of the user with the realities of undisciplined knowledge. Undisciplined, again, once we embrace it from within the legacy of ruptured teleologies or

even from within the forgetful field of what Derrida understood as the differances of the erasures of archival fever.

The archive dissipates the temporal identity from which we like to admire ourselves to conjure the ruptures of history; the archive breaks the lineage of transcendental teleologies; and there, where anthropological thought interrogates the being of man and his subjectivity, the archive explodes the “other” and the “outside.” (Foucault, 1969, 172). It is in this sense of an interrogation through art and curating that we have formulated our sense of archival practice as an explosion of the outside as the imaginary boundary that separates the public from the private.

At the same time as Foucault argues for a generalized archival discourse of difference, he gestures to the promises of institutionally specific practices that might profit from the very “surface effectivity of discourse” in the expansion and accumulation of the archival event. Foucault sees in the institutional commitment to expanding resources, open archives, and limitless storage (all in the age preceding “open source” archiving) something different from the legacy of “legibility” and “memory.” For it is precisely the surge of accumulation, the continual surprise of informational texture, and the layers of enunciational multiplicity that lend to the archive its power. While “surface” might often be associated with only the threshold of memory, if not also with mere digital glamour, we are fascinated by how connective screen cultures have empowered the everyday event of the archive. The screen lives and breathes memorial reconstruction while also interacting with linked associations provided by media and networked cultures.

Most reflective of these conceptual parameters is our curatorial collaboration with the –empyre- listserv. –empyre- was initially founded by Melinda Rackham in 2002 as “a soft-skinned space,” one that would create a new public network of artists and theorists to spawn a virtual discussion of emergent practice. Now a community of some 1500 international members, the community focuses each month on the discussion of emergent topics important to the new media community, while maintaining an online archive of its ten years of discourse. Part of our ongoing commitment to maintaining and growing –empyre-, during a period when Melinda and previous managers have moved on to other projects, is to profit from the vitality of this listserv as a literal reconfiguration of public space. Initially, –empyre- capitalized on the freshness of the web by soliciting an online community via complex discourse delivered to the members’ e-mail mailboxes and simultaneously preserved for a public web archive. Now with the arrival of social networking sites such as Facebook and YouTube, which users voluntarily visit for less robust forms of conversation, we remain committed to maintaining the more antiquated e-mail format of –empyre- as a means of disrupting the now settled norms of social networking with heady e-mail blasts and monthly topographical shifts of discussion topics. While limited in scope to textual communication, –empyre- continues to resist the corporate codification of public net space while continuing to render uncertain the frameworks of networked space and global aesthetics. We even understand the fascinating amoebic syncopation of the listserv to accentuate the flow between public and private, as conceptual gaps occur when subscriber’s threads fall silent because other subscribers do not respond, or intent and content is misunderstood, or even when there is a language barrier between subscribers writing in differing languages. At all times, however, the postings accumulate, whether in singular silence or cacophonous dialogue, to result in a soft-skinned space of expansive and effervescent chatter about the ephemerality of digital aesthetics and its uncertainty.

Within both real and virtual spaces, The Tinker Factory and the Rose Goldsen Archive of New Media Art are born from similar notions of digital accumulation. Within the real space of the open lab, The Tinker Factory allows generative networking of ideas, problem solving, and skill building through practice and

tinkering. The Tinker Factory is a lab for research design, creativity and interdisciplinary technology created by Renate converging the cross-disciplinary areas of new media and emerging technology. As a space that exists "outside" of regular university programs and curriculum, the research lab, nurtures interactive, technological, and artistic research, by inviting students as well as faculty from many of the University's multi-disciplinary colleges to not only investigate technical possibilities, to engage in artistic collaborations, as well as critical and historical implications for ongoing research projects. In this workshop atmosphere, participants have investigated both the networked extension of public space and experimented with how digital and analog components might render uncertain the parameters of public space through interventions with noise, light, and networked culture.

Similarly, The Rose Goldsen Archive of New Media Art exists as a flexible library and networked space that has grown over the years to house collections of American new media art, Chinese and Taiwanese contemporary and new media art, internet art, CD-Rom/DVD Art, and, now expansive collections of video art that rekindle new media's relation with its distant past. Following the principles of undisciplined knowledge, the Goldsen Archive has set out to be indifferent to conventions of archival legibility in order to catalyze a critical rethinking of the meaning of the archive in the age of electronic art. At stake is a reconceptualization of art away from critical dependency on the narrative of history, the psychology of identification, and even the heroics of connoisseurship. Most important, its shifting reliance on online and offline platforms embodies the networked condition as grounded in tension with deeply influential institutional constructs.

Renate's on-site and on-line artistic project, *Private Secrets/Public Lies*, exemplifies the toggle between both the real and virtual spaces of the archive. Secrets and lies are at the crux of networked relationships whether they are grounded within the privacy of family dynamics or the public realm of international government relations. Most interesting is how easily the public flows between those two social constructions in the digital age. In her compelling work of non-fiction, *A Chorus of Stone*, Susan Griffin emulates the interconnectedness of how the personal experiences of an individual can have resonances into the affairs of international states directly relating to the underlying causes and or effects of war.

The inter-relationship between matters of individual privacy, secrecy, and concealment on one hand or the open, forthright, tendency for revelation were also key contradictions in the biography and life work of Sigmund Freud. It is for that reason that Renate uses Freud's writings as grounds for inspiration. In his construction of the screen memory, he provides us with insight into how memory is re-composited in the present. By looking at the past from the present we attempt to uncover the deposits of our unconscious archive of memory while acknowledging how the presentness of memory depends on the structural role of erasure through the processes of revision, re-inscription, or re-presentation, a memory conglomeration of the accumulated uncertain data/memory.

Both a performative, collaborative installation and an on-line game, the project, *Private Secrets, Public Lies* <http://www.privatesecretspubliclies.net/> showcases the collective screened memory of the participants whereby each contributor is asked to re-constitute the lively energetics of his or hers personal trove of secrets. In this project the variable of erasure is foregrounded through the underlying code and the intrigue of viral technology.

The on-going construction over time of this project as a collaboration with willing participants in the real public spaces of an installation toggled to the virtually accessible online game enables an assemblage of data traces in an ever expanding site. In the virtual version of *Private Secrets/ Public Lies* subsequent screens of the project ask the user for inputted text data, the content of which is parsed into keywords

via code and algorithms. What is left for the participant to interact with is an archive of floating data bubbles each filled with words left from previous participants. As players manipulate residual keywords from former user's information, the newly formed keyword phrase interfaces through World Wide Web via Bing. Having had their private secrets erased by fusion, the players are able to peruse news feeds, entertainment, and advertisements. The more often the interactive simulation of Private Secrets/Public Lies is activated the more often it implicitly records and archives the misguided personal information and deconstructed content and meaning of the originally intended personal information. What remains accessible on the homepage is not the original private secret but an archived list of what was subsequently transformed by player manipulation and internet linkage.

This playful translation of private data, enabled by the speed and instantaneous nature of the viral context, meaning, and intent of the original texts are playfully reminiscent of the notion of "erasure" within instability and uncertainty of Foucault's archive. The nature of evidence and memory is transformed in relation to the technology embedded in it. The real truth can neither be accessed nor verified. But, thought otherwise, couldn't we say that the real truth, at least as existent in the world of Web 2.0, consists of the active, playful, and provocative erasure of memory itself.

In a new project, Suspicious Packages <http://www.renateferro.net/suspicious/>, Renate begins to lay the groundwork for another archive, a collection of audio narratives. As participants recount situations where personal space or belongings have been under suspicion, the territories between the private and public again become blurred. Difficult to demarcate a border or marker that divides or separates, often times suspicion takes on a contested imaginary. As the project spans both the real and virtual spaces of exhibition, the object relations of packages of all shapes and sizes will trigger digital events via sensors that will illicit channels of video feedback in real time intermixed with archival footage, animation, still images, and sound.

In the real spaces of emergency preparedness as Renate and Tim left New York one day after the tenth anniversary of 9/11, Mayor Bloomberg in a televised press conference urged all citizens to be wary of suspicious packages. In the very early stages of researching the project, Renate took note of the virtual links online to both the Centers for Disease and Prevention and ready.gov the place to get up to date information on emergency preparedness. The relationship of information on the virtual site and the urgency to manage the panic of an event in real space and time were sources of reflection for the relationship between an artistic archive online and the manifest of that in a real time exhibition space.

Our aim in presenting the cross-pollination of both our independent and collaborative work, work that remains between the interstices of the real and the networked, between the Goldsen Archive for New Media Art and the Tinker Factory is not only to move between the creative and research worlds in new media arts, but also to continue to forge innovative initiatives that will expand our notion of the archive itself and the range of relational artistic interventions in its midst. Additionally, these parallels lay the conceptual groundwork for future cross-disciplinary ventures where the value of conceptual tinkering with technical and physical tinkering opens the possibilities of inventive research with the network of uncertain territories.