PRISM: An Artistic Exploration of Personal Privacy in an Age of Mass Surveillance

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Michael Takeo Magruder

A Brief Overview of My Artistic Practice

For the past 15 years my work has focused on integrating computational processes and systems – such as algorithms, live data and interactivity – into visual arts practice. This of course has involved the production of many screen-based, online works, now often referred to as Internet Art (or Net Art) and various projects created within shared virtual environments – metaverses such as Second Life and its open source equivalent Open Simulator.

But during the whole of this time, one of my primary concerns has been to try to find ways of getting the digital artifacts and experiences 'off the screen' and integrating them into physical, real spaces – like the black box, public and urban settings, and spaces for performance – blending real and virtual environments and bodies with existing, often historical architectures, or of course, the white cube – the traditional and sacrosanct home of visual art.

Michael Takeo Magruder | Media Artist

Michael Takeo Magruder is an artist and researcher who works with digital and new media including real-time data, immersive environments, mobile devices and virtual worlds. His practice explores concepts ranging from media criticism and aesthetic journalism to digital formalism and computational aesthetics, deploying Information Age technologies and systems to examine our networked, media-rich world. During the past 15 years his projects have been showcased in over 250 exhibitions in 30 countries. In 2010, he was selected to represent the UK at *Manifesta* 8 and several of his most well-known digital artworks were added to the Rose Goldsen Archive of New Media Art at Cornell University.

Aesthetic Journalism & Surfacing Narrative

In terms of concepts, my projects align to a focused group of conceptual threads that include topics like Media Criticism, Digital Formalism and Computational Aesthetics. But the area I want to focus on today is Aesthetic Journalism – art practice that integrates journalistic techniques and preoccupations as core elements within the artistic process.

The term was coined by Alfredo Cramerotti – an internationally renowned curator based in the UK – in his book *Aesthetic Journalism: How to Inform without Informing*. My work in this area is concerned with surfacing hidden, often suppressed, narratives. Over the past decade, I have reflected on issues such as the questionable conditions and ethics surrounding modern warfare in situations like the Iraq Wars and the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict; the rising forms of borderless insurgency within the post 9-11 political landscape and how governments' enactment of a 'War on Terror' has permeated so many aspects of everyday life; and the rise of new, de-centralized and distributed online organizations like WikiLeaks that have ushered in a paradigm shift within the media and information landscape.

For me as an artist working in these areas, the intention is to use Art as a platform through which I can create spaces for critical reflection that are removed from government and corporate influence and propaganda.

Exploring the Snowden Disclosures & PRISM

In this present time of Datafication (the process through which so many aspects of our day-to-day lives are captured and stored as computerized, linked data), one of the most important issues for us to consider is personal privacy and the ways in which we can now be 'watched' by governments and corporations alike.

Although individuals like me have been thinking about this issue for quite some time, it was not until the release of classified NSA and Five Eyes documents by Edward Snowden and his collaborators in June 2013 that the extent of these mass surveillance programs became clear.

During this time I had begun collaborating with Headlong on their digital project for *1984*, and when I was invited by Sarah Grochala (associate artist, Headlong) to produce an artwork reflecting on and responding to

the themes of their production, I proposed to create a work based upon the idea of Edward Snowden as the modern day equivalent of Winston Smith. Over a period of many months I meticulously researched Snowden's story – both his claims and the counter-claims offered by the government agencies and corporations he had implicated, as well as many of the opinions and 'facts' that were being propagated through online media channels and social networks. I carefully collected the entire scope of Snowden's leaked documents (now they are readily available, but at the time they were not, and I had to undertake extensive data mining activities – searching through international online news media repositories and peer-to-peer torrent networks – in order to obtain the complete collection of his releases) and from these materials, I created the *PRISM* artwork – a real-time media installation with four distinct components.

Image captured from *PRISM*

Image captured from *Digital Double App*

The first element was an algorithmic video that had been created from the entire collection of Snowden's disclosed documents and his two main interviews (one by Laura Poitras and Glen Greenwald while he was in 'hiding' in Hong Kong and the other by the German news agency NDR once he was in exile in Russia). These raw materials were structured into a media asset database contained within a single Flash file that would endlessly pull from and stitch together the materials, thus generating a narrative for the work.

The second element was a live data stream from the Digital Double App – in full color and clarity (in intentional contrast to the de-saturated video narrative) that represented the 'here and now' of what was (and still is) being collected from our personal lives.

The third element was a publication (produced in both online and physical print forms) that outlined key questions and information which had surfaced during my research. I designed the publication in an unbound (and thus reconfigurable) format and focused on providing 'notes' and links through which people could track back to my original sources, so it could act as a point of departure for self-exploration rather than a definitive 'guide' to the history in question.

"…'Direct Access' didn't mean no access. 'Back door' didn't mean no door.

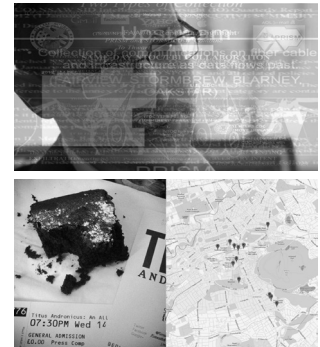'Only in accordance with the law' didn't mean PRISM is illegal. And

you didn't need to have heard of a codename to have participated. Larry [Page], [Mark] Zuck[erberg], you didn't spell out your denials of the NSA's data spying program in plain English, and now we know why. You were obligated to help the government in its spying, but were muzzled. The New York Times says you knowingly participated in the NSA's data monitoring program. In some cases, you were asked to create 'a locked mailbox and give the government the key,' to allow it to peer into private communications and web activity. Even if the exact words of your denials were accurate, they seemed to obscure the scope of your involvement with PRISM. Outlining as clearly as possible exactly what kind of data the government could attain would have gone a long way. [⋯] The terms you used disguised what was going on. Direct access means unrestricted access with no intermediary, but the government didn't need to be standing in the server rooms to get what it wanted. A back door means access to data without its host's knowledge or consent, but you were well aware of the NSA's snooping. The NSA's actions are likely protected by law, so saying you're only honoring prying that's legal didn't mean no prying. And why would the government tell you the juicy codename or details of its data spying program? All it had to say is it needed your data. Now these excuses ring hollow. The average citizen doesn't know the difference. They heard 'we didn't help the NSA,' and you did, so their trust in you has disintegrated. That's a threat to your business, and our way of life. I like that all my friends use Google Docs. I like that I can invite any of my friends to a Facebook Event. Seeing them ditch the building blocks of the web you've developed because they don't believe anything you say anymore will be a great inconvenience. And that inconvenience pales in importance to the actual liberty PRISM strips away from us..."

And the final element – a iconic graphic created from blending the Snowden documents with the official NSA logo – a framing backdrop composed in the tradition of the 1984 INSOC logo, but purposefully different in that this graphic (like the NSA's activities) blended into the fabric of the information itself – integrated and obscured in 'plain sight.' These four elements were brought together for the first time as a physical public installation that was placed in the main entrance hall of the King's Building in central London

to coincide with Headlong's production of *1984*, the launch of the *Digital Double App* and the company's work within King's College London's Knowledge Producers program.

Final Thoughts

Digital technologies have certainly given us many new affordances, but they have also made this age of mass surveillance possible. With this in mind, I think it is crucial to highlight through artworks such as *PRISM* the importance of considering questions about government control, corporate collusion and public vulnerability. These are the issues that we have to consider, we need to consider. Returning to the thoughts of Snowden:

"…Because even if you're not doing anything wrong you're being watched and recorded. And the storage capability of these systems increases every year consistently by orders of magnitude, to where it's getting to the point where you don't have to have done anything wrong. You simply have to eventually fall under suspicion from somebody – even by a wrong call. And then they can use this system to go back in time and scrutinize every decision you've ever made, every friend you've ever discussed something with. And attack you on that basis to sort of derive suspicion from an innocent life and paint anyone in the context of a wrongdoer…"

Because even though this is a bleak note to end on, it is the world that we now live in. ∞
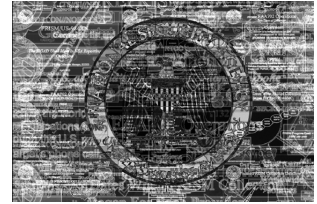
PRISM Publication
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Installation View, King's College London