REPORT

Transmediale: Festival for Art & Digital Culture

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From Skype duets to an artist shaking hands with one thousand people and then taking “Microbiome Selfies” of the germs on his hands, from a performance of a flying drone to a brief history of the air raid siren, from angst about maker culture being co-opted to complaints about the creeping complicity of the sharing economy with neoliberalism, Transmediale is an annual five-day festival in Berlin that approaches digital art, technology, and culture from a mind-bogglingly diverse panoply of conceptual, theoretical, and disciplinary starting points.

The twenty-ninth festival kicked off the first evening with the zany and delectably strange Superschool: Conversation Starter, a lecture-performance that attempted to transform an internet chat room into a performance. With an anything goes, off-kilter intelligentsia’s game show feel, complete with a gong and three “experts” seen only as dark silhouettes behind a screen, the performance centered around a cyborg-like man in a half stupor reciting fruitless Wikipedia searches in a drone-like computerized voice, as well as boisterous interventions from planted audience members.

Brooding, portentous, and imbued with a claustrophobic feeling of enclosure, Sophie Hoyle’s memorable video essay Anxious to Secure (2016) added a foreboding tension to the “Inner Security” panel, a discussion of security politics within the digital age. Moderated by Theresa Züger, the panel began with Martin Hartmann’s discussion of different typologies of trust within political philosophy and the pressure that classical notions of trust are put under in the age of ubiquitous surveillance. It concluded with Hoyle’s video essay comprised of a stream of hard-hitting, even damning, pronouncements about the prevalence of anxiety disorders and psychiatry as a tool of biopolitical control, woven into a larger context of the complicity of the American Psychiatric Association in the War on Terror’s use of torture, and a citing of Giorgio Agamben’s theory of the “state of exception” to justify extrajudicial killings in the United States.

Ridden with a bleak, indefatigable suspicion of the nefarious motives of various institutions (government, psychiatry, military) and with periodic intertitles such as “Inner Security: Anxiety from the Interpersonal to the Geopolitical,” “Interpersonal Security and Technology,” and “Geopolitical Security and the Discourse of Crisis,” Hoyle’s video gave a stunning indictment of the contradiction of the US intervening in Iraq and Afghanistan to putatively uphold international law on human rights violations, while simultaneously using interrogation methods defined as torture under international law. Reading almost like a manifesto with dense nuggets of texts, the video statements by themselves might have come across as plodding or monolithic were it not for the beguiling seventeen-minute accompanying audio collage consisting of a pulsating, grinding doppler-like wave sound, a helicopter sound, a metallic clanging, and an anxious, gasping breathing.

On a jauntier note, with the requisite perky enthusiasm of aerobics instructors, complete with headbands and sweat suits to match, visual artist Liat Berdugo and choreographer/dancer Phoebe Osborne held an aerobics class in which the aerobic exercises replicated movements we make with our hands while navigating iPhones, iPods, and mobile devices in their lecture-performance Unpatentable Multitouch Aerobics (2015–present). With a class of fifty participants clad in aerobics gear, Berdugo and Osborne began with such an impeccable personification of the bubbly “can-do” aerobics instructor, I found myself curious to see if this persona was meant ironically (it was). After forty-five minutes of aerobics, the group sat in a circle and began talking about the affective dimensions and notions of intimacy embedded in the new gestural lexicons engendered by our use of mobile devices. The term “unpatentable” is an ironic reference to the fact that Apple is suing Samsung for patent infringement for its multitouch gestures, with Berdugo commenting on her website that each time we swipe, scroll, and pinch to zoom on our handheld devices, we are in fact leasing our movements from Apple.

Unpatentable Multitouch Aerobics was important in that it is so seldom one sees acknowledged the threshold we have crossed: that our “staples” now—the iPhones, Instagram, social media, etc., around which our communication, news gathering, schedules, personas, and lives revolve—are things we could not have imagined ten or fifteen years ago. If one thinks about society before and after the invention of the telephone, before and after the invention of the automobile, the refrigerator, or the airplane—one could say the wholesale move from the analogue to the digital/mobile coupled with the ubiquity of social media is a tidal change of commensurable magnitude. Yet one sees people blithely jumping on the bandwagon of these changes with alacrity, very seldom reflecting upon or pondering them.

For the third year in a row, Transmediale grappled with the ramifications of National Security Agency (NSA) whistleblower Edward Snowden’s revelations of state secrets. It began with the panel “Tacit Futures #1: Building Snowden Archives” and culminated in a ten-hour workshop the next day that was a clearinghouse for various players in the post-Snowden “freedom of information” scene—journalists, hacktivists, information activists—to cross-pollinate ideas about how to make use of the Snowden revelations. The starting point for discussions was provided by the pioneering archivists and project groups working with the Snowden archives, many of which were gathered in one room for the first time: the Snowden Document Search from the Courage Foundation, the Snowden Digital Surveillance Archive, the Snowden Archive-in-a-Box, and Cryptome.

This gathering was a continuation of a now two-year-old “Commoning Movement,” revolving around the online journal Berliner Gazette and organized by its founder, Krystian Woznicki, and his colleagues, which seeks to take the Snowden archives out of the privatized domain of journalist Glenn Greenwald and documentary filmmaker Laura Poitras, and put them into the public domain. It was at the “Snowden Files for All?” panel in November 2014 at the Slow Politics Berliner Gazette conference that Geet Lovink, founder of the Institute of Network Cultures, first voiced his distrust of journalists as being inimical to the project of “commoning the archives.” This distrust of what some information activists view as the self-interested tendencies of journalists to hoard the Snowden NSA revelations in
a “digital enclosure” was echoed by members of the New York City–based organization Cryptome, speakers at this year’s Transmediale Snowden panel and workshop. A forerunner of WikiLeaks, Cryptome has hosted a whistleblower website for leaked intelligence documents since 1996. The two founders of Cryptome—artist Deborah Natios and architect John Young—gave a withering indictment of how the Snowden archives have been monopolized by the media in an interview on RebootFM during the Transmediale Festival with Pit Schultz (author of The Producer as Power User [2006] and founder of nettime.org).

Referring to how Snowden gave Greenwald and Poitras sole access to the NSA cables, Natsios said,

It is a serious conflict of interest; they [Poitras and Greenwald] have written themselves into the story, as heroes of the story. They are not at a distance from their source; they have embedded themselves in the narrative. And therefore all decisions are highly suspect because they benefit from the outcome of the narrative in every sense. Their approach has been un-democratic and extremely proprietary. They jealously hang onto this collection in an entitled way, that is now embedded in their careers, their prizes, their awards, their personae, their growing celebrity in the culture, and now museum shows.

Of course, no Transmediale festival would be complete without the appearance of Jacob Appelbaum, hacktivist and former member of WikiLeaks. And indeed, Appelbaum presented Autonomy Cube, a collaboration with visual artist Trevor Paglen wherein a Tor relay (i.e. a global network of thousands of volunteer-run servers, relays, and services designed to anonymize data in order to render one untraceable on the web) was embedded inside a sleek cube-like sculpture, thereby wedding the minimalism legacy of sentient objects confronting spectators as embodied entities with the “dark web,” as elaborated by architect-theorist Keller Easterling. The fact that we now see “Tor sculptures” is emblematic in that Tor, once firmly in the realm of techie esoteria and barely known to the public, has in the last several years evolved into the “pop star of privacy-protection tools.” Easterling expanded upon Appelbaum’s evangelist praise for Tor in her talk on the Autonomy Cube.

Cryptome’s skepticism toward what they see as journalists’ and filmmakers’ exploitation of whistleblowers/hackers was echoed again by someone in the audience in the “Let’s Talk About Whistleblowing!” panel. During the question-answer session, an audience member asked, “Now that all the journalists/filmmakers have exploited the Snowden archive, post-fame, post-Oscar, when is the public finally going to have access to the Snowden files?” To this, Appelbaum said, very deliberately, “I agree.” However, there was dissensus on this point, as two of the other four panelists—Annegret Falter, former chairperson of Whistleblower-Netzwerk, and Wolfgang Kaleck, Snowden’s lawyer—disagreed that the Snowden archives should be thrown into the public domain. The oft-cited reason for their objection is the claim that the cables in raw form would be incomprehensible to the public and require a “mediator.” Appelbaum called for a wholesale “delegitimization of the culture of secrecy” and provocatively advocated for a scenario in which whistleblowing would be considered a moderate option, not an extreme option. He called for more extreme actions (such as outright sabotage of a corporation) to be the norm, thereby rendering whistleblowing a “middle of the road” route.

Perhaps the greatest strength of the Transmediale festival, and what renders it unique compared to other festivals of a similar nature, is its complete lack of technofetishism. I am accustomed to festivals of “digital art and technology” being ridden with a mindless infatuation with buzzing, whirring, shiny gadgets with high production value but rarely any ingenious grasp of conceptual issues underpinning technology, where a puerile fascination with slick technology replaces actual ideas. On the contrary, Transmediale is deeply immersed in situating technology at the crossroads of vital sociopolitical issues, crises, and polemics that have reverberations outside the realm of art and technology. At Transmediale, technology and digital culture are often mere jumping-off points to delve into larger social or anthropological issues. Standout examples this year included Eyal Weizman’s explosive presentation of a project by the Goldsmiths, University of London—based Forensic Architecture, which refutes denials of the Israeli military about attacking unarmed Palestinian civilians by digitally recreating sites of conflict and amassing “counter-forenomic” evidence; Hito Steyerl’s exploration of pareidolia (an illusion in which people perceive meaning, patterns, or forms in random phenomena) around her analysis of drone strikes; Telekommunisten’s “WhiteSave.me” app that helps people detect how “white” they are and whether they qualify to be a “white savior”; Peng Collective’s call for civil disobedience in helping undocumented refugees cross European borders; and Eric Kluitenberg’s theorization of how the archive can be responsive to temporary media-activist interventions or “tactical media.” Another great strength of the festival is the sheer ebullience of its eclecticism—where various dense subcultures are put into dialogue with one another and where high-rolling “art stars” (Steyerl, Weizman, Easterling) can rub elbows with Chaos Communication Congress information activists or merry pranksters like Geheimagentur, who are attempting to occupy the port of Hamburg. Whereas in the US, these subcultures are largely balkanized, where one would have to attend a separate conference for each subculture—Maker Faire for the hacker artists, Dorkbot for the electronic sound artists, College Art Association for the famous art critics, 16 Beaver Studio for the dense theoretical discussion, and NCOR (National Conference on Organized Resistance) for the hard-core activists—at Transmediale, all the subcultures are thrown together in a delightfully unpredictable digital art and culture bouillabaisse.

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