

The Aesthetic Paradoxes of Visualising the Networked Image

Operating within the cloud has fundamentally revolutionised the way in which we interact and work with each other. Connecting our output and personal data with other individuals and communities has resulted in an intricate network that we are only beginning to understand the full implications of. However, it is becoming clear that our data has easily translated in to both social and monetary capital through the process of data mining. Throughout this paper, we are looking to investigate the nature of data mining through artistic visual translation, in addition to the larger cultural and social consequences of the cloud more generally.

The mining of personal data became par for the course within online social interactions almost as soon as said interactions were a necessary element of our everyday lives. The visualization of social mining can be most obviously observed with targeted ads on Facebook. No sooner have you typed “comfortable underwear” into Google do you find ads from Bonds appearing next to your friends riveting food blog updates. While this communicates as a creepy infringement at first, it quickly becomes the norm in our online excursions.

I would argue that the speed in which this acquiesce occurs is largely due to the personal bond one feels with their personal computer, after all, more often than not this machine has travelled with us throughout significant times of personal change. Due to this companionship, our personal machines can become like a close friend, or more accurately the device in which we deliver our most preferred constructed self. This trusting bond with our machine allows for the appearance of our personal data, no matter what platform, to appear innocuous. While cognitively we’re aware of the methods in which this personal data has materialized, we are not so fully able to picture the implications of this data being “out there” in the general population.

SLIDE

This raises further questions about where this “out there” of our personal data is. While everything is engineered to make us feel like this place of the cloud is everywhere and nowhere, a “non-place” or a literal U or E-topia, it is common knowledge that depending on the software involved this data will in fact be being accumulated in giant servers farms in some obscure offshore location, as well as quite likely making its way to wherever the NSA and other surveillance organisations process their/our data. Because of this the salient question becomes not what is the cloud, but where is the cloud, which implies a political geography of networks that turn out to be not at all “everywhere and nowhere”, “rhizomatic”, “decentred many to many communication”, but to pass through specific channels with significant bottlenecks in the US that is what enables the NSA to spy so easily on global Internet communications [diagram]. But if our data is indeed somewhere, this somewhere is not revealed to us, and anyway is a technical black box that even if we could locate it it would be impossible for us to read, even if at the same time it is being decrypted in automated processes to detect if there is a hidden menace lurking somewhere below the pop videos, durnken nights out and cute cats.

What this requires is not an ontology of the cloud but a political geography, something Benjamin Bratton has been attempting through his concept of “the stack”. Inspired by the design of computer architectures themselves, Bratton extrapolates this to a planetary level, insisting that we are coming to live within a mega computational architecture of which the cloud would be but one component: “The Stack, in short, is ... rendered now as vertically thickened political geography. In my analysis, there are six layers to this Stack: Earth, Cloud, City, Address, Interface, and User”. All of these terms while having common sense meanings, when probed further reveal mutations and ambiguities; the earth is no longer as imagined in classical ecology but a human and technology transformed environment that is arguably passing from the anthropocene to a

post-anthropocene world; users are agencies which can by no means be assumed to be unproblematically human and so on. Where the cloud is concerned, Bratton sees it as potentially constituting a new kind of state, or future of the state that is no longer tied to a specific territory but impinges on existing territorial states as can be seen in the conflict between Google and China, for example. On a more intimate level, we are increasingly becoming dual beings with two habitations, one in a conventional organic body, delimited in time and space, a here and now, and cloud entities of data distributed across multiple networks and housed in who know what and who knows where, server farms and data banks. Perhaps this is even a triple existence; alongside our actual existence in a body, there is also the hypervisible identity we are constructing for ourselves across multiple networks, readable by other human agents, and the other invisible self constructed from our data footprint, including those autonomic processes we are only dimly or not at all aware of, such as when we didn't realise we were being tracked by a surveillance camera, or simply the residue of Internet and mobile search, geo-tagging etc. But we can be sure that this invisible self is being seen, somewhere if only by non-human agents, only coming to the attention of what we still naively think of as “secret agents”, intelligence analysts, when certain flags are raised. Finally perhaps there is a fourth self that is no longer individuated at all, where our own data is merged within the sea of big data as one part of a population of collective phenomena or so-called social trends in which our individuality and subjectivity is barely relevant, even if at least for advertising purposes this sea of data is being re-singularised to arrive on our walls, or email accounts as “personalised” spam. In such a complex and opaque, one could say literally cloudy world, visualising where we are in all these different data clouds becomes a pressing and vital concern.

SLIDE

It is for this reason that I have spent the last four years my studio-based research has focussed on translating our online lives and personas back into the offline world. In my most recent exhibition ‘Here You Are’ at Archive Space in Sydney, I created a project based on data collected from Facebook check-ins; I monitored the check-ins of my friends to discover the places people wanted to be hypervisible. Facebook check-in’s are a feature introduced in 2010 that allow the user to share their location on their timeline. This feature includes the possibility of a status and a photograph, as such, all three elements were explored in the exhibition. The check-in feature was of particular interest to me in relation to the cloud because as most people know, any update we make to Facebook is has already been geotagged with our current location. I wanted to see where it was people wanted to be “seen” within my community.

To help me collect the data for this project I collaborated with Google/Spotify programmer Nic Cope, who designed a web based program collating data from AppEngine, Python, Twitter Bootstrap, and the Facebook Graph API that allowed me to monitor every check-in ever made from the people within my friend’s feed. I aimed to act as an artist anthropologist, studying the city as it is seen in the real world, and as it is seen through the screen. The elements of place, picture and text/status were explored as follows:

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Place:

I created a sculptural installation piece to represent the data collected, to do this I created small sculptures of the “drop pin” used to point out a location in Google maps. The installation is geographically aligned with the area and based on a to-scale map of a 1km radius of the gallery, in which 1mm = 1m. The drop pins are positioned as to the number of check-ins at each location, where 1cm = 1 check-in, for example, Thai Riffic received 7 check-ins, so is positioned 7cm from the floor. The data was hand counted to exclude duplicates, and collate any doubled-up venue locations, for example, there were separate entries for the ZanziBar and

their event, Birdcage. I wanted to create a new topographical map to investigate the landscape of 'cool' within the area, as clearly no one was checking-in at more ordinary locations.

SLIDES

Picture:

At the most popular locations in the study I took a picture of myself, finishing with 3 large format 'selfie' photographs 1.3 x 1.3 metre square, in the styles of Instagram, Hipstagram and other photo-sharing online communities. The photos were taken at times when the most popular sites were most popular. Unsurprisingly these locations were all bars, the most popular being the Courthouse between 10-11pm, the Townhall from 11pm-12am and the Zanzibar's Birdcage night between 12-1am. I magnified the scale of the images from their original context in the hopes of gleaning insight into what makes these places so important, and to playfully make fun of the divide between high-art and everyday life. I printed these images on glass in reference to the mobile, tablet or computer screens in which these images are usually viewed.

SLIDE

VIDEO

Text:

A series of status' that accompany 'check-ins' was collected, and anonymously cycled through an LED sign. Touching on the theme of self-promotion mentioned earlier, the sign was displayed near the gallery's window, as though it were advertising a special in regular shop. The comparative presence of these 'embodied' comments in the physical space they were made, rather than the online space they were posted-to, absurdly translated these experiences back into the literal present.

Responding to this project in the context of this conference, I see it as a kind of cloud ethnography, distinct from digital ethnography or netnography in the usual sense, in that despite appearances it takes a decentering a-subjective perspective, rather than the human-centric focus of most digital ethnographies. This is announced already in the title "Here You Are"; not the positionality of "here I am" that the check-in is supposed to be from the perspective of a user, but the "here you are" of being located and split between the user's physical location and their position in the crowd. As such it doubles and extends the operations of the cloud on the user, that abstracts from their subjectivity and desires to connect with others, display their hipness, or advertise their social life, metadata useful for and available for processes that remain obscure but that will ultimately re-address the user in the forms of targeted advertising, spam or at the extreme attention form state or otherwise security services. Whatever its ultimate uses and market value, these acts of self-location submit subjects to an intimate outside, through which self-promotion, and self-representation become available and manipulable data, which is what takes place in a different way in the installation.

The catalogue essay indicates that there is an inevitable violence in abstracting the banal texts of check-ins from their original contexts.

"This intrusive act [of data mining] we are all subject to without much knowledge of it happening. Highlighting the ease and frequency of this act her friends check-ins within a kilometer radius of Archive_ [were] broadcast in foot-high letters across an obnoxious LED screen. This repackaging is poignant."

This intrusiveness was deliberately highlighted by the use of the LED sign, displaying these locational texts in kitsch fonts, thereby generating media archaeological resonances with earlier technologies. Similarly, the transformation of the ephemeral selfie from the most popular locations, into high quality works of fine art, point to the fact that these acts of self-representation are in fact anything but ephemeral and instead, stored, archived and are tradable and exchangeable on a range of markets that may or may not return to the original user in altered form. In short, these ‘self(ie)-representative acts’, are acts of willing submission to the invisible hands of the cloud, as a set of relations of data exchange and commodification that are by their very nature opaque and cloudy, but nevertheless have a definable geography, as exemplified by their translation or tracing into the offline space of the check-in balloons in the installation. Visualising all of this works against this cloud logic not by rejecting abstraction as data, but by abstracting in a different direction, that of a making visible rather than invisible, showing how the small pleasures of social media are feeding all kinds of invisible processes. This act of making visible the invisible, is not a resistance to this cloud condition from some impossible, ‘pure’, outside perspective, but rather an act of immanent complicity that nevertheless works against the cloud logics described above, generating a sense that “another cloud is possible”, the condition of possibility of which is perceiving the cloud in which we are currently caught.

Cloud computing offers a variety of useful/revolutionary opportunities, the “noise” generated from the sheer volume of information has, in a way, become a new obstacle course that we are in the process of navigating. The internet-age, and social media specifically, has been heralded as the great equalizer, with everyone having the opportunity to tell their story and have their narratives preserved. While “check-ins” are only one small facet of this documentation, the themes explored in the artwork can be applied to a variety of cloud-based discussions. The vast archival potential of the cloud is the central element of most “cloud-heads” excited discussion, yet with so much information, one wonders how much of this information will ever see the light of day. With so much talking – who is actually listening? And if no ones listening, what is the point?

“Technology is seductive when what it offers meets our human vulnerabilities. And as it turns out, we are very vulnerable indeed. We are lonely but fearful of intimacy... Our networked life allows us to hide from each other, even as we are tethered to each other.” – Turkle

Coley and Lockwood’s book *Cloud Time* is relevant here in its critical engagement with what they call “cloud culture” as a protological logic of the inception of the future. Extending from concepts such as Grusin’s pre-mediation, and Alexander Galloway’s work on protocol as a new modality of network control, Coley and Lockwood point to the ways that behind the elaborate promises of cloud technologies, lie processes of capture and modulation of potential, reaching down into the fabric of everyday life:

“Our everyday actions are deemed to cast a lengthening shadow that is captured and logged, the structure of the everyday is pregnant with an information layer the system of parametric and algorithmic control to which we remain unaware – and social practices themselves are full of implied metadata, even and especially those interactions yet to take place. What’s more, the always on archival ecology is awash in a dynamic noise of data an immanent informational static an atmosphere rather than a layer, something which gets into the individual such that modulations and intensifications to its rhythm bring about physical and biological changes a transmission of affect” (Coley and Lockwood)

In this context, “here you are” shows one aspect of how we are inserted in this data cloud via check-in practices, and how we are then modulated at a virtual informational level, while still feeling that we are expressing our true selves via witty, poignant or otherwise notable check-ins. All of this registers the shift from public expression of subjectivity to the publicity of self-advertising, generated by the very structures of cloud based social media. Here you are, therefore refers to a noisy and paradoxical location in which the self is willingly submitted to virtualised flows of data that perform multiple functions at once; while we believe

ourselves to be advertising the hipness of our daily activities, thereby self-commodifying, this process runs much deeper as the data we generate is not only or mainly our self commodification but our rendering as a tradeable and exchangeable meta data commodity for the big other of the various social networks we participate in and which are fully exploiting us as we imagine we are using them for our own purposes, whether social or self promotional or both. The Cloud is not a range of services outside of us and for our needs, existing or invented, but we are rather increasingly within the Cloud, inhabiting its forms of temporality and pre-emption, becoming a mere input to its immense memotechnical archive, enabling our forgetfulness, stupidity and subjective evacuation, in a dynamic that is as Coley and Lockwood suggest less a scientific rationalisation of life than a weird science fictional phantasmagorification of our existence: “Science fiction deals in virtuals. The radicality of (capitalist) reality is precisely that capital has embraced science fiction....capital has become experimental” (Coley and Lockwood).

In this scenario, *Inception* or *The Matrix* take on a documentary quality, in the putting to use of our subjective desires as the fuel for a mega-archival machinery: it is the transformation of capitalist into science fiction realism, right at those places where we are playing out our most singular desires and enacting intimate social relations—we can check in and out anytime we like, but the reality is that the cloud we are checked into is rapidly becoming a space and a temporality that we can never leave. This makes it all the more urgent and necessary to develop practices and strategies for making visible the opaque networks concealed within the cloud, as happens in “Here You Are” and other art-works.