

## Screegrab7

### Catalogue Essay

**Resistance:** disrupt the information flow

We live in contradictory times. Irrespective of our geography we are wedged between the hegemony of entrenched oppositional forces. In a sense, we are the collateral damage of their friction. Of the old rallying against the new, of bold invention and nostalgic yearning, of extreme science and conservative politics, of playful language and language that plays with us, of terror and anti-terror, of social inclusion and those who seek to divide and to conquer.

This malaise of disruption, within the politics of identity and the parameters of personal space, is also rapidly seeping into our networks. In a Post-Snowden world brimming with silent imperturbable devices we are experiencing a growing sense of uncertainty around notions of security, privacy and identity. What now constitutes a private act? And what of space, our personal geography? Once a site of freedom and spontaneity of movement it now constitutes a data asset to be sold on the open market.

A collective anxiety about mass electronic surveillance by servers in the tundra, by drones in the skies and black domes in shopping malls present a new kind of permanent virtuality, or as Tudor Sala has observed, a “surveillance apocalypse”<sup>1</sup>. So to the miniaturisation of devices for listening and for watching - brain scanners at airports, cube satellites in orbit and swarms of RFID tags in our clothes and under our skin bring with them an uncanny likeness to tales we only ever used to watch in the dark. Coupled with the 24/7 mapping of the planet – the Earth as an algorithm rather than an ecosystem – we are experiencing a new type of absolute power.

As we struggle to frame a substantive view of the meta-narratives that constitute our contemporary moment – religious terror, climate change, global trade pacts and big data – we are also conscious of the omnipresence of the machine gaze. What we are experiencing is at once global and local; a devolution of both history and politics at the whim of a new type of panopticon. In this place “the distinction between left and right is by now less important than the distinction between truth politics and power politics”. These of course are age-old forces, multiplexing along familiar fault lines. As Sala observes, “total surveillance—whether as ideal or nightmare, whether as theory or practice, whether as tradition or innovation—is by no means a contrivance of the present or the near future, but rather a construction of the distant past.” The difference being however, that now these forces operate within much closer proximity, in ever diminishing circles in a variety of ambiguous cloaks and guises.

The cultural temperature of the times is very different now, but the vision machine has also become a democratised technology with many components. With the aid of the lens, the wireless spectrum, the radar, GPS coordinates, open software and databases we can also hack back. Artists such as Trevor Paglen, Jacob Appelbaum and David Bridle have set the aesthetic tone for this resistance.<sup>2</sup> Events such as *SAMIZDATA: Tactics and Strategies for Resistance*<sup>3</sup> hosted by the Disruption Network Lab and *Surveillant Antiquities and Modern Transparencies: Exercising and Resisting Surveillance Then and Now* both in Berlin in the autumn of 2015 point to an emergent critical debate surrounding not only surveillance technology but the tactics for pushing back in a Post-Snowden dome.

It is from here through the reach of the network that we can trace the emergence of a mediated resistance: from the geo-political campaigns of the Adbusters Foundation in the mid-90s culminating in the Battle for Seattle in 1999, to the Arab Spring and Occupy movements of the 2010s to the anti-austerity politics of Syriza and Podemos<sup>4</sup> and the mass migration of refugees in present day Europe. Each period is representative of a heavily mediated and multi-layered reaction to dramatic shifts in both absolute power and notions of truth. They also represent a shift in our experience and articulation of notions of resistance:

“Today the increasing importance of digitally mediated action is putting into question the previous centrality accorded to ‘collective identity’.” Since the emergence of global social justice movements of the late 1990s “older forms of solidarity (where organizations act through their members, via structures of delegation and representation) are giving way to new forms of fluidarity where personal experience was becoming so central to collective action that previous forms of ‘social movement’ were giving way to new forms of ‘experience movement’”. (MacDonald, 2015)<sup>5</sup>

It is precisely this notion of experience, of the personal intersecting with the broader social context, that is indicative of the approach taken by many of the artists in the work collected here for Screengrab7. Nowhere perhaps is this more evident than in Sirin Bahar Demirel’s *Living With Leviathan* that documents from a very personal perspective the Occupy Gezi movement in Turkey, in the summer of 2013. We wince at the sight of a small child afflicted by the effects of tear gas, we see the flash of gunfire and tear gas bombs down an alleyway and most alarmingly the camera is there - we are there - in close quarters with the protestors as they make their defiant stand. It is a personal narrative too, on one hand it is an open letter from the filmmaker to Turkey’s Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, and on the other hand an audio-visual lament for a particular type of innocence lost at the hands of the nation state. It is also a powerful image construction that pushes back against a resistant media apparatus that seeks to conceal it - the leviathan: “... because when ordinary people who share funny cat videos on the internet start to spread information about what to do in case of being taken into custody it’s called state terrorism. And it was insane how the media was silent as a wall and how I had to watch some Norwegian channel to see what’s happening in my street and I hated it.”<sup>6</sup>

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Art endures in between these kinetic forces, lurking at the edges of their chaotic and often destructive interplay. As Jacques Ranciere has observed, “to resist is to adopt the posture of someone who stands opposed to the order of things”. In this space, art – and its protagonists – demonstrate “a willing deference to established forms of domination and exploitation.”<sup>7</sup> The time arises of course when we must also resist the march of history, and it is often art that has the ability to set out corrective markers that bring the politics of power back into check. This is certainly the case with *10 Minutes to Midnight* (Australia, 2015) a multi-screen film essay by the artist collective Alphaville and Nuclear Futures that examines the horrific legacy of Australia and Britain’s nuclear testing program in the decades after WWII. It is a difficult film to watch, the devastating facts seldom told, the imagery rarely seen, a counter-narrative to the conventional flow. It is a reality however for the lands of the Anangu people in which extreme science has brought upon them an unwanted permanence - isotopes that seek out the bones of its victims entering the system “through the teeth, the bone and the marrow.” It is also the story of the young serviceman who stood in the glare of those atomic clouds unwittingly manipulated by the military power structure, to quote one survivor, and be “used as guinea pigs”. As artist, Jessie Boylen, writes, “to resist is to counter dominant narratives by presenting alternative ones; by reactivating the past and reimagining the future through the eyes of those who witnessed it.” Luhsun Tan brings a different sort of permanence to his work *Intensity* (Australia, 2015) in which the richly textured image of a piece of canvass from the original tent embassy in Canberra becomes an altogether different edifice. Here the pixels express the glacial shifts in politics and rhetoric, a tethered flag of small victories and the heavy weight of an unrecognised history – the original Australian resistance centuries in the making.

Grayson Cooke’s art/science project *Frack* (Australia, 2015) attempts to catch history as it is being written in a point of conflict between mining companies and local communities across Australia. Here unlikely allies, environmentalists and farmers, are waging a fierce resistance against an industry that is operating both above and below the ground. Cooke articulates this through a chemical process that is as much about

materiality as it is about aesthetic discourse. Cooke dissolves photographic imagery of sedimentary rock printed on slide films in the very chemicals employed in the hydraulic fracturing process used in the mining of coal seam gas. Here the aesthetics of representation are amplified as the slide film cracks and melts and wilts along the compositional lines of the image evoking the process of “fracking” itself. In a wonderful allegory for what is surely the last belligerent act of the fossil fuel industry we can almost see the past sins committed against the land and the waterways dissolving away in liquefied crystals of geological colour and toxic wisps of acid.

Much of the creative resistance on display here operates in the public space in the form of media interventions, acts of aesthetic politics and expressions of ephemeral digital discourse. Andreas Lutz and Christoph Grünberger take this a step further in the documentation of their project, *Wutbürger* (Germany, 2014) in which the stage is a coffin-like chamber for a very private performance that ultimately becomes the architecture of a more public display. This is a grueling absurdist 5 hour performance conducted once by the artist but then digitized, multiplied and distributed for the commons. It is presented in a variety of guerilla interventions across Germany all with “Wutbürger potential”<sup>8</sup>: nuclear power plants, the European Central Bank and mass surveillance facilities. Here the personal struggle occurs in isolation and within a vacuum. The madness, the frustration and the powerlessness of the id is made public resisting the social norms that would otherwise have us in such moments hide ourselves away.

There is a sense of concealment in the works of Heidi Kumao and Lynn Estomin whereby the private narrative is normally hidden far from view. For these women the real experience of their lives exists beyond the lens beyond what can be articulated here. In Kumao’s *Egress* (USA, 2014) women who live under authoritarian regimes construct alternative realities through the printed word. For them the absurdity of their oppression inspires an altogether different type of authorship and knowledge transfer – a new type of power. While in Estomin’s *Fashion To Die* (USA, 2015) women are hurried along corridors, shepherded into assembly lines in the clothing sweatshops of Bangladesh. The regime of cheap mass production is something we barely understand in the West yet it is something we wear the benefits of largely in ignorance. There is a wicked history of the global textile industry summarized here, one that the lens of mainstream media has barely caught sufficient glimpse of, except of course when something goes horribly wrong.

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Art of course can resist time, the object of art can persist long after the fight has been won or lost. We put up monuments of art to speak on our behalf when all else has seemingly failed. The act of its creation resists the forces that would seek to oppose its very existence. Such is the oppositional nature of politics, capital and culture. Just as Lutz and Grünberger turn a performance into a permanent transcription, so to does Mohsen Zare’s *DV Lottery* (Iran, 2015) take the idea of the fleeting digital object and transform into something to be examined in a more lyrical context. Here small portrait photos taken by Iranian citizens seeking a new home abroad via the annual US Green Card Lottery become heavily treated digital objects imbued with a strange new permanence. In some instances the image is all that remains as individuals melt into jpeg files and slip across borders with, as Zare observes, “a perpetual passion for fleeing from home.”

Elsewhere the monument is a simple gesture, in Anna Beata Baranska and Michal Baranski’s *Thing that wasn't possible yesterday is happening today and isn't a barrier for tomorrow* (Poland, 2007) it is a single candle flame bending with the breathe of absurdist political rhetoric. In Anupong Charoenmitr’s *To Face* (Thailand, 2014) it is the meat cleaver, the hook and blade sharpener at the feet of an abattoir worker in Thailand as man and beast face off in the seconds that precede the kill. It is an uncomfortable wait as we conjure our own expectations of what will follow, as Charoenmitr observes, “Man will link things together, as is his will. And one important thing that human beings require for understanding the event is ‘the confrontation’.” Similarly in Daniel McKewen’s *Zarathustra’s Cave* (Australia, 2014) there is a different kind

of stillness at work. In this instance it is the set of *Seinfeld*,<sup>9</sup> Jerry's vacant apartment, that was such a familiar virtual extension of every 1990s living room just as Hawkeye's Swamp was during endless reruns of M\*A\*S\*H in the 1980s.<sup>10</sup> Here however, the apartment door remains closed and we watch with a curious desire to see it open again as it has done so many thousand times before. In this monument to absence a strange stillness pervades the empty set, subverting our expectations of both the site of performance – this proscenium arch / this screen-space – and our willingness to be pulled along by familiar narrative devices. And yet the stillness persists, citing the show's often-repeated core conceit McKewen says, "this is a nothing-space". It is a site of dead air occasionally punctuated by a familiar laugh track that is so iconic of the American sitcom experience.

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The Screengrab7 artist call that was circulated in early September of 2015 sort to attract works that not only interrogated the status quo by resisting the doctrine of their inevitability but also demonstrated that these entrenched systems of control are themselves resistant to change. Resistance can be viewed as both a liberating force and an agent of destabilisation.

Resistance can disrupt the flow of information, bend the circuitry, jam the signal and hack the network. This is on display literally in Thomas Marcusson's *Signs of Surveillance* (Australia, 2015), a series of interactive neon signs<sup>11</sup> that react to nearby mobile phone activity. Here Marcusson is giving visibility to the unseen, teasing out the frequencies of our personal communications, demonstrating their vulnerability and opaqueness. Like the steady hum and liquid glow of a server farm when the work senses the presence of a mobile phone signal being dispatched the neon sizzles, blinks and spits out distorted fragments of pre-recorded phone conversations.

If art can be a political act, then Marcusson's work demonstrates that media art is a technologically enabled one. As technology increasingly fades into the background atmosphere of the everyday it is only through disruption that we can draw attention to its presence. By doing so however we must also draw attention to our own role in the information space. What is it that we see when we peer out of the virtual panopticon of our contemporary cities, shopping malls, office blocks and vessels of transportation? In Gregory Bennet's *Panopticon I* (New Zealand, 2015) it would seem that there is a certain inevitability about this machine transition. Here the panopticon has become a dense echo chamber – a towering fortress of surveillance and homogeneity. Humanity reduced to pre-ordained algorithmic models, sprockets and cogs, push-ups and handstands, Escher-like treadmills and digital fire pits where pixels are slain and apps are born. This is the body as neither cyborg nor computer A.I. but rather a 3D wire-mesh construction following predictable patterns of motion and endless repetition – individual identity subsumed into the data matrix.

Elsewhere, it is the city itself that comes under examination as we continue to resist the formulaic grid-like template of the contemporary urban space. In Theo Tagholm's *Simulacra* (UK, 2015) it is the ordered perfection of Google Earth, of the Corbis image bank, of middle class gentrification that is interrogated as Tagholm takes to the hyperreal landscape with a slide rule and a box-cutter. Po-Yen Wang reassembles the iconic structures of major European, American and Asian tourist structures in the appropriately titled *Xeroxed Destinations* (USA, 2015). Here we see a perversion of national monuments flattened as two dimensional consumer products in a swirling montage of concrete and steel. Fabled examples of historical architecture reduced to their geometric roots, or as Wang observes, "transfigured into some kind of cog in what has become the assembly line of tourism."

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Indeed by making art we are conducting an act of resistance. We are subverting accepted norms, we are stepping outside of the media stream – or directly in front of it – and making a calculated statement. In *Making You* (USA, 2015) Emily Martinez and Liat Berdugo have a slick new product to promote. This is an altogether different end game in which the sharing economy produces a new type of neo-liberal subject designed by capitalist idealism – packaged in Californian logic - yet plagued by first-world insecurities and new forms of emotional poverty. We become eager participants in this glossy exchange – it’s an old Steve Jobs card trick – in which we end up doing most of the sharing as we are lured into a bright and shiny future. Here in this new economy of the self we are overwhelmed by the possibilities so much so that our inevitable companion would appear to be a sharp suited, smooth talking “portfolio manager of the self.”<sup>12</sup>

Through media interventions we can point toward alternative pathways, expose bias and stand apart from the common binary politics of our times. As Graham Harman notes, “as philosophers, we’re not supposed to be swept along with the Zeitgeist, we’re supposed to be resisting it.” We resist political rhetoric by asking questions of language, of history and of context. We resist surveillance by pointing the camera back at the watchers. We resist the recurring bile of racism, sexism and bigotry by subverting stereotypes by creating new forms of beauty and a more interconnected sense of identity. We resist the predatory nature of capital and the upward linearity of growth and accumulation by challenging notions of value and currency with alternative definitions of wealth and new expressions of personal freedom.

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For Screenrab7, all forms of resistance were considered, by an international community of over 400 media arts practitioners from some 54 countries: the politics of resistance, the physics of resistance, the messiness of resistance, and the urgency of resistance. In this age of contradiction – and as Bruce Sterling has observed, of “favela chic and gothic high-tech”<sup>13</sup> – it is the duality of our relationship to the forces of order and control that is central to the examination being conducted here.

We resist, not as some might have it – to impede or to destroy the status quo – indeed, that would be too obvious, too easy, and too predictable. Resistance through art making, through creative expression, is subtler and more nuanced than that. The act of resistance in art, as in life, is to demand a more complex, empathetic and interconnected human experience.

**Mitch Goodwin** 02015\*  
**Screengrab** Founding Curator

## End Notes & Links

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<sup>1</sup> Sala, T (2015) *Surveillant Antiquities and Modern Transparencies: Exercising and Resisting Surveillance Then and Now*, Topoi Building Dahlem, Berlin  
(see: <https://community.topoi.org/web/b-5-cofund-surveillance-workshop>)

<sup>2</sup> For examples see Paglen’s *The Fence (Lake Kickapoo, Texas)* (2013) and his *Untitled Drone* series (2010) (<http://www.paglen.com>). Also see Bridle’s *Dronestagram* series (2012-2015) (<https://instagram.com/dronestagram/>) and especially the text that accompanies his image construction *Light of God* (2012) (<https://www.flickr.com/photos/stml/8122855101/>).

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- <sup>3</sup> SAMIZDATA: *Tactics and Strategies for Resistance by the Disruption Network Lab* in conjunction with SAMIZDATA: *Evidence of Conspiracy* by Jacob Appelbaum at NOME Gallery, Berlin curated by Tatiana Bazzichelli (see: <http://www.disruptionlab.org/samizdata/>)
- <sup>4</sup> Kassam, Ashifa (2015) *Spain's Podemos inspired by Syriza's victory in Greek elections*, The Guardian (see: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jan/26/spain-podemos-syriza-victory-greek-elections>)
- <sup>5</sup> McDonald, K (2015) *From Indymedia to Anonymous: rethinking action and identity in digital cultures* in *Information, Communication & Society*, 18:8, Routledge, London
- <sup>6</sup> Demirel, SB (2013) *Living With Leviathan*, Turkey
- <sup>7</sup> Ranciere, J (2010) *Dissensus: On Politics & Aesthetics*, London: Bloomsbury
- <sup>8</sup> In Germany, 'Wutbürger' are people who share a common feeling of disappointment about politics and who manifest anger through public demonstrations. Here Lutz and Grünberger are questioning its singular use, the enraged citizen who focuses this rage against himself.
- <sup>9</sup> David, L & Seinfeld, J (1989-1998) *Seinfeld*, NBC and Columbia TriStar Television, New York
- <sup>10</sup> Gelbert, L (1972-1983) *M\*A\*S\*H*, CBS and 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox Television, Los Angeles
- <sup>11</sup> The signs themselves are actual names of government surveillance programs used to gather large amounts of private information. "Mystic" is the name of an extensive mobile surveillance program used by the United States' National Security Agency (NSA), designed to record and intercept massive amounts of mobile communications.
- <sup>12</sup> Martinez, E and Berdugo, L (2015) *Making You*, USA
- <sup>13</sup> Sterling, B (2009) *On favela chic and gothic high-tech*, Reboot 11, Copenhagen (see: <http://www.wired.com/2011/02/transcript-of-reboot-11-speech-by-bruce-sterling-25-6-2009/>)

\* *The Long Now Foundation uses five-digit dates, the extra zero is to solve the deca-millennium bug which will come into effect in about 8,000 years. The Long Now Foundation was established in 01996 to resist today's accelerating culture and help make long-term thinking more common. See: <http://longnow.org/about/>*