

Artveillance Practices : From graffiti to social network sites

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- Abstract** This paper explores the artistic production of Lene Berg and Jacob Wren, on a Facebook fan page during the Montreal's OFFTA¹ festival. Drawing from Goffman's work and email interviews, we found that their artistic production called "Big Brother where art thou"² is a form of artveillance. Both artists use the metaphor of Big Brother and embody the surveillance gaze while performing anonymously in order to question the control practiced on our data by Facebook. Artveillance did not aim to subvert the relationships of power between the watcher and the watched. Rather, the fan page and the choices made by the artist gave the artistic production a "depersonalized" aspect, which prevented the artists from meeting their own expectations of recognition through artveillance practices. Therefore, it is fundamental to understand to what extent visibility of recognition can be achieved within social network sites.
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¹ <http://www.offta.com/>

² <http://fr-ca.facebook.com/pages/Big-Brother-where-art-thou/140309529372662?sk-wall&filter=12>

1. Introduction

During these past years, social network sites (SNS) have drawn the attention of several scholars. SNS are user generated content Sites (UGC) belonging to the family of social media, within which users can construct a semi-public or public profile, maintain a social presence and engage in self-presentation and self-disclosure. The ability to engage in these two processes on SNS is shaped by the functionalities provided to users, which differ from site to site (boyd & Ellison, 2007; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). It is well documented that these sites collect users' data (Proulx & Kwok Choon, 2011).

The first section of this paper illustrates a brief analysis of surveillance practices on Facebook and the various practices that emerged within this space. The second section describes the methods used. In the third section we argue that the performance of Lene Berg and Jacob Wren is a form of artveillance, which questions practices of surveillance on Facebook. We show that the artists were not able to achieve their own expectations of recognition, mainly because of the choices they made and the depersonalized aspect of the fan page that did not invite users to participation. We then underline the importance on how individuals engage creatively with contemporary devices of surveillance.

1.1. Social network sites and surveillance

"Surveillance, as the automatic electronic gleaning of personal data, has developed rapidly on the Internet, and the process is likely to intensify with the commercialization of such networked, computer-mediated communications" (Lyon, 1998, p. 91). Like wiretapping, video surveillance, tracking of individuals via biometric cards, social media surveillance contributes to an expansion and proliferation of surveillance in our society. Within SNS such as Facebook³, the practice of institutional surveillance and interpersonal surveillance is accompanied by a specific mode of data collection (Proulx & Kwok Choon, 2011).

Institutional surveillance on Facebook takes the form of a dataveillance (Clarke, 1999). First the site collects users' data and then it identifies

³ With more than 600 millions of users in the world and more than 17 million in Canada, Facebook is the social network site the most popular (<http://www.socialbakers.com/facebook-statistics/>)

users' interests and provides them with specific advertising (Fuchs, 2011). Facebook sells users' personal information to advertisers⁴. Interpersonal surveillance has a dimension of play and is practiced through participation on the site (Albrechtslund, 2008). However, with the use of applications such as the News Feed or the Timeline aggregator, users can monitor the activities of their peers. These two kinds of surveillance are not dissociated, thus revealing the coercion linked to such practice and may put the privacy of users in danger. We are in the presence of contemporary forms of surveillance, which subtly infiltrates users' social interactions with the aim of controlling users' personal information and their activities.

1.2. From the construction of identity to resistance practices

In this surveillance context, various practices have emerged: identity construction, the appropriation of the platform by various professionals, and resistance practices. Identity construction on social network sites is a strategic process (Cardon, 2010 ; Coutant & Stenger, 2010). Cardon (2010) argued that users construct their identities in a *clair-obscur*⁵ zone on Facebook, by alternating between the concealment and the disclosure of their information. Coutant and Stenger (2010) stated that the adolescents interviewed during their research negotiate their identities on SNS by considering the different spheres (friends, ceremonial, public) in which the information is being produced and shared.

Moreover, professionals such as politicians, journalists, celebrities and various organizations use these sites. In 2008 President Obama used Facebook during his presidential campaign in order to recruit voters. Some newspapers encouraged their journalists to have a profile on SNS to interact with the readers and for rapid circulation of information (Wilson, 2008).

Individuals used SNS as tools of communication to shape their resistance practices. In 2011 Facebook was widely used during the Arab uprisings to contest the oppression exerted by the dominant order on various populations of the Arab countries (Cottle, 2011). Sanchez (2009) showed that resistance practices against Facebook's data aggregation

⁴ <http://www.facebook.com/>

⁵ *Clair-obscur* is a metaphor that illustrates that on Facebook conversations are not confined to a specific zone and context of visibility.

techniques could emerge within the site while Gould (2010) underlined that it was an efficient tool of communication for students on strike.

2. Methodology

This research explores two questions: how to describe the artistic practices of Lene Berg and Jacob Wren on the Facebook fan page “Big Brother Where art Thou”; and to what extent Facebook can be used as a tool for artistic production. With the grab application⁶, we captured screenshots of twenty conversations from this Facebook fan page. The conversations were analyzed while using Goffman’s⁷ work (1969). Further, we interviewed the artists and two members of the OFFTA official team by email and ten users who “liked” the fan page via Facebook private messages⁸. Drawing from the grounded theory principles (Corbin & Strauss, 1990), we coded the interviews and conversational analysis data. The main themes were identified and are discussed in the following sections.

3. Results

3.1. The performance of the artists

Berg and Wren performed anonymously through A and B and frequently used the metaphor of Big Brother⁹ during their conversations on the fan page. For example, does the notion Big Brother cover something that we would have been able to see if he wasn’t taking this particular space in our imagination? or “George Orwell never imagined that Facebook equals Big Brother ?” Their discourses included pictures illustrating the principal character of Orwell’s novel, several extracts of Facebook’s privacy settings and articles that argued that Facebook encourages peer surveillance and the collection of users’ data.

⁶ <http://osx.iuethis.com/app/grab>

⁷ Goffman described the mechanisms inherent to daily social interactions, through the concept of Facework. Social image is constructed through perpetual and inter-individual negotiation, during which individuals will maintain one’s face and preserve the face of the other individuals in presence. Negotiation engages impression management and unveils the performance inherent to interactions.

⁸ Jacob Wren’s answered on the 4/04/2012, Lene Berg’s answered on the 15/04/2012, the two members of the OFFTA replied to our email on the 14/04/2012. And users engaged in private conversations on Facebook from the 16/05/2012 to the 21/05/2012.

⁹ Big Brother is the central character of Orwell’s novel 1984. It represents a totalitarian surveillance practiced by the state.

During their interactions on the fan page, they maintained a form of reciprocity. Berg and Wren agreed that their publications on Facebook should respect the central theme of the “MIXOFF”¹⁰ which was decided by Wren, just after he saw a slogan with the message ‘Facebook equals Big Brother’. Although they were not able to discuss on their publications during the event, the two artists preserved their respective positive social image while validating their discourses through publishing complementary information about Facebook and Big Brother.

Thus, they offered the same vision of the character of surveillance on Facebook. In this particular context, surveillance has a negative value and tends to reproduce the coercive effects of Big Brother and positioning art as an ensemble of creative techniques that addresses, questions, and analyzes surveillance practices on Facebook.

3.2. Artveillance

To question the surveillance effects of a site within which surveillance is practiced seems contradictory but reveals that we are in the presence of artveillance practices. Brighenti (2010) defined artveillance as reciprocal influences and exchanges between surveillance and art. He identified two major stakes linked to this practice (ibid., p. 175): the fact that art is mediated and remediated by technology and that surveillance can be perceived as “an ‘artful’ set of techniques, which may be more creative”.

Different forms of artveillance have emerged in urban and mediated environments. Banksy is known to question the surveillance practices through his graffiti. In 2010, he drew two ostriches on the walls of the national gallery in London. One of the ostrich’s neck stretched towards the video surveillance and the device replaced the head of the ostrich¹¹. The Surveillance Camera Players, who are a group of interventionists, believes that video surveillance is a violation to privacy rights. They perform frequently before camera surveillance with the use of “I love Big Brother” posters (Thompson & al. 2004). The artist Elahi, who was arrested as a terrorist suspect by the FBI in 2002, practices self-surveillance by posting his every move on his website (Brighenti 2010, p.

¹⁰ The “MIXOFFs” are hybrid events imagined by the artistic direction, they aim to shake up the established practices of the performing arts and question modes of representation (OFFTA, 2012). “Big Brother Where art Thou” was the “MIXOFF 2.0” held on Facebook from 27/05/2011 to 4/06/2011.

¹¹ <http://www.banksy.co.uk/outdoors/ostricnat.html>

182). We may acknowledge his intention to draw attention to the augmentation of social sorting¹² post 9/11.

Both Berg and Wren as well as the individuals in the previous examples all played with the gaze of surveillance and embodied this gaze in the process of questioning, criticizing, or subverting its effects during performance. However, the intent of artveillance in this specific context was not to subvert the relationships of power between the watcher and the watched. Berg and Wren affirmed that “Big Brother Where art Thou ” was a “Facebook collage” and “a project on Facebook about Facebook”. Drawing from the interviews and the fact that this artveillance was in a context of a leisure activity, we conclude that artveillance had a dimension of play. In contrast, the artist Elahi positions himself as an empowered subject, by showing to the FBI that he can watch his every move better than they do. Thus, he is struggling against social sorting. There is a desire to shift the gaze of surveillance from informational systems that provides biased information about individuals to his website. Artveillance in this case has dimensions of both play and politics.

As Brighenti (ibid) acknowledges, artveillance is intrinsically linked to regimes of visibility. In order to render their practices visible, the OFFTA chose to use a site that practices a control on users’ activities and personal information through its architecture of visibility. The members of the OFFTA and the artists wished that “Big Brother Where art Thou” would gain visibility and that it will lead to various conversations on the page:

Wren : *I have to admit that I was a bit disappointed the Big Brother project didn’t reach more people. I thought because I have 5000 Facebook friends, I could easily reach all of them, but apparently it doesn’t work that way. (sic)*

OFFTA : *Few commentaries, as the artistic aspect of the project on Facebook seems to have given the impression to the public that they could not intervened. (sic)*

¹² Social sorting is a metaphor that illustrates how individuals’ data is being sorted, classified, stored by technologies of security and in the process categorizing individuals that belong to specific ethnic groups since 9/11 (Lyon, 2006).

3.3. In search of social recognition

In a certain way, Berg and Wren were searching for recognition of their practices. According to Axel Honneth (2001), there are three forms of recognition. The first one is linked to the spheres of love and friendship, it aims in establishing self-confidence in the individual. The second form of recognition refers to the respect of the fundamental rights of an individual, contributing to self-respect. The third form of recognition provides us with self-esteem, through the recognition of our activities linked to our social status; it is the sphere of social esteem. We acknowledged that the artists were in search of the third form of recognition, they wished that their practices gained recognition for its uniqueness from their artistic peers, their social groups and the public.

The 573 “likes” of the fan page revealed a form of appreciation of the artistic production. The users interviewed looked at the fan page several times during the event and considered themselves as “passive” participants. They said that the form taken by “Big Brother Where art Thou” on the fan page did not encourage participation as it is read like an informational feed and they did not receive any message encouraging them to participate.

For example:

Mateo : *I did not get any clues or receive any messages that would have encouraged me to collaborate (even indirectly).*

Jean-Guy : *The experiment looked more like an informational flow than a real discussion.*

Marie : *I don't think that I received specific messages that said that my participation was not welcomed (...) I was not sure to understand what this project was all about.*

The Facebook fan page, *Petits frères où êtes-vous?*¹³ emerged in response to “Big Brother Where art Thou”, further exploring the themes relating to Big Brother and surveillance on Facebook through conversation of Daniel Canty and Guillaume Corbeil. The artists stated on this fan page that their artistic production is an “off” of the “MIXOFF 2.0”. The creation of such a page and the fact that Canty and Corbeil “liked” the artistic production “Big Brother Where art Thou”, showed that Berg and Wren received a form of recognition from their artistic peers.

¹³ <http://www.facebook.com/pages/Petits-frères-où-êtes-vous/132553000154761>

The artists' choices as well as the architectural elements shaped the reception of the artistic production. Facebook's fan page offered a greater field of visibility to the practices but the publications were not visible to their social network as they performed in anonymity. Only those who "liked" the page and who "friended" A and B were able to have an update of their activities. As a matter of fact, Wren affirmed that if he had to do "one thing differently about this project it would be to make it in a way where it showed up in as many feeds as possible (...) as the project didn't naturally appear in the news-feeds of all my friends". Berg said, "If I was to do something like this again, I think I would publish the material on another page and only use Facebook to refer to that page and other pages."

Furthermore, they were relying on the power of the network in circulating information rapidly and making it visible to a vast audience. On Facebook information circulates in *clair-obscur* zones (Cardon, 2010), and are not propelled into the public sphere spontaneously. Therefore the information is not visible in a broader sense. If mainstream media or individuals controlling certain channels of communication redistribute this information, it can benefit from a greater visibility. The fan page at that time gave a "depersonalized" aspect to "Big Brother Where art Thou", rendering it less interactive and more like a flow of information that was not to be questioned or commented upon.

4. Conclusion

Facebook can be used as a tool to produce art, if art is approached as an ongoing process of conversing and questioning a particular topic. However, the platform offers a narrow palette of functionalities, which may prove to be a difficult task for artists engaging in artistic practices. Artveillance practices are hybrid in nature and can have a dimension of play, or a political dimension, or both.

With the proliferation and expansion of surveillance in our society, we need to have both an understanding of how technological developments such as Facebook has introduced new power and visibility regimes and how individuals engage creatively with these devices. Based on these findings, unintended practices can emerge within an architecture of visibility, which practices control. Therefore, it is fundamental to

understand to what extent visibility of recognition can be achieved within social network sites.

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