

SECURITY AESTHETIC = SYSTEMS PANIC

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- + Where does security end, and insecurity begin? Systems analysts recognise this as a classic boundary question. Its answer determines the precise deployment of any security system. But as we shall see, this particular boundary question cannot be answered under present conditions, except through the definition of a second system, a specifically interrogatory one. Drawing on the work of an American art critic of the 1960s, I'll call this second kind of bounded entity an 'aesthetic system'.

First we should consider how security systems are installed in reality. Attention is focused on every point where an environment, conceived as 'secure', comes into contact with its outer edges. Typically, these edges are doors, windows, property lines, borders, coasts, air-space – every place of ingress or egress. At each of the edges, a catalogue of known and present dangers is established. An analysis is conducted to determine the most effective responses to these dangers; and then locks, barriers, fences, warning devices, surveillance personnel, armed guards, etc. are positioned at the system's boundaries to repel the threat. Further efforts are expended to look into the crystal ball of the future, predicting all those points where new threats could call for the definition of new boundaries. More material and personnel can now be deployed, or at least, readied for deployment. The security system expands dynamically, continually adjusting its relations to the outside world, continually redefining its own boundaries as a system.

One can easily imagine how a home, an airport or a harbour can be made 'secure'. An initial, safe or 'quiet' inside space must simply be preserved from outer harm. But what happens in a complex social system, one composed of many different actors, some with irreconcilably diverging interests? What happens when the space to be protected is as much linguistic and ideological as it is physical and architectural, so that a breach of legitimacy or a leak of information can be perceived as illicit ingress or egress? In short, what happens in a contested environment where threats can arise from within? The response is clear: what happens is vertiginous paranoia.

The problem of the system's edges suddenly multiplies: the boundary to be secured is now the entire volume of the system, its width, its breadth, its depth, its characteristics and qualities and most damnedly of of all, its human potential for change. The resulting proliferation of eyes, ears, cameras, snooping devices, data banks, cross-checks and spiraling analytical anxiety in the face of every conceivable contingency is what defines the present security panic. Under these conditions, no form of precaution could appear superfluous. Statistical models of equilibrium are checked constantly against real-time deviations. Nascent trends are examined for potentially hostile extrapolations. Endlessly ramifying if-then scenarios are extended preemptively into the future. An aesthetics of closure striving toward mathematical certainty becomes the tacitly nourished ethos of the security system.

Yet there is one further complication that merits our attention, particularly in what is called a democracy, where surveillance of the state by the citizens is an historical norm. This is the fact that security measures, in the face of a proliferating internal enemy, come rapidly to be shrouded in a veil of secrecy. The veil is not only cast to preserve their immediate effectiveness, though that is obviously an issue. But there is more at stake. Secrecy, from the viewpoint of the security system, is required to keep the initial security measures from backfiring and producing greater insecurity.

For what if innocent but marginalised social groups knew the extent to which they are being spied on? Would they not then feel further alienation, and maybe even defect to the side of the enemy? And what if mainstream citizens themselves had to be surveilled, for fear that a violent anomaly might be lurking somewhere in an average profile? If they knew they were being watched, wouldn't these honest citizens become angered and demand an end to the proliferation of security measures? Doesn't opinion control then become necessary at all levels of the system? And how about educational and cultural censorship, morality brigades, conversation police? Where does security end, and insecurity begin?

Cybernetic Shadow-Boxing

As you can see from the world around us, any security system is destined under stress to become an entity of uncertain contours, a veritable black hole in society, extending its cloak of invisibility to the exact extent that its internal paranoia deepens; and at the same time generating an external paranoia about its operations that can only provoke a redoubling of its initial drive to stealth and invisibility. Under these conditions, what becomes necessary for the maintenance of democracy is a specific kind of social system, whose probing and questioning can provide some renewed transparency. This is where art criticism used to have great ideas.

Writing in 1968, Jack Burnham predicted the coming demise of the traditional art object, and with it, of the figure of the artist as *Homo faber*, or man the maker. In their place would arise 'aesthetic systems' shaped by *Homo arbiter formae*, man the decider of forms. The essential reasons for this shift were technological and organisational: in an age of ever-more complex and powerful information machines, constructed by ever-more sophisticated and extensive organisations, an art that retained the simple posture of manufacture, or hand-making, would inevitably be condemned to lose all relevance in the world. Yet this declining relevance could be countered if the artist rose to the challenges of the contemporary process of production. The cybernetic design of expansive socio-technical systems could be reflected and evaluated by the deployment of

compact aesthetic systems. As Burnham wrote:

‘The systems approach goes beyond a concern with staged environments and happenings; it deals in a revolutionary fashion with the larger problem of boundary concepts... Conceptual focus rather than material limits define the system. Thus any situation, either in or outside the context of art, may be designed and judged as a system... In evaluating systems, the artist is a perspectivist considering goals, boundaries, structure, input, output, and related activity inside and outside the system. Where the object almost always has a fixed shape and boundaries, the consistency of a system may be altered in time and space, its behavior determined both by external conditions and its mechanisms of control.’ (1968)

Burnham’s insights were far ahead of his time. In the 1960s, what he mainly had before his eyes were sculptural environments, or what we now call installations: relatively simple systems of interaction with the public, which no longer appeared as art objects, but rather as heterogeneous assemblages of parts, some of which might break down and could then be replaced without in any way damaging the originality or authenticity of the system. Hans Haacke’s early sculptures were the classic examples – and that was already a revolution. What we have seen emerging in the art of our time, however, particularly since computerised communications technology became widely available in the 1990s, are subtly aestheticised versions of complex socio-technical systems: networks of actors, equipment, physical sites and virtual spaces allowing for the orchestration of highly diverse activities. In this context of spiraling interaction, the most important artistic decisions are the ones that shape the systemic boundary, lending the system its degrees of recognisability and irrerecognisability, and thus, its potential for symbolic agency. As Burnham remarks, the systems artist ‘operates as a quasi-political provocateur, though in no concrete sense is he an ideologist or a moralist’ (1968).

How then does a democratic systems aesthetic come into play, in the face of

security panic with its inherent tendencies toward invisibility, concealed intentions, censorship and even aggression? What we have is the paradoxical, yet also paradigmatic case where one systemic boundary can only be identified by determining another. What this means is that an aesthetic system must be constituted as a fully operational reality: a project, a team, an alliance or network that can probe the contours of the secret, dissimulating system, and at the same time, reveal those hidden outlines mimetically, through its own outer forms, its own vocabularies and images, its characteristic modes of appearance and communication. What you get then, in art, are elaborate fakes, doppelgängers, double agents, fictional entities that strive to produce outbreaks of truth at their points of contact with the hidden system. What you get, in other words, are counter-models, the virtual outlines of rival systems. This is the principle of some of the most advanced art of our day. Jack Burnham understood it in 1968. But there’s just one problem: later generations of critics did not read him.¹

While security systems proliferate, and while strategic reality hackers devise complex and sardonic lures to ferret them out and render them visible, the majority of cultural commentators remain blind to the entire predicament and go on blithering about the tragedies of great painting or the modest pleasures of relational art. Yet there are other things under the sun, even if they are not so easy to see. An urgent task of cultural critique in the age of security panic is to help carve out space in democratic societies for the necessary fictions, feints, satires, double-identities and organisational shadow-boxing of aesthetic systems.

Probing the Black World

A paradigmatic case is Marko Peljhan’s *Trust-System 15*, initiated in 1995, which is an attempt to build an unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) for civilian counter-reconnaissance and independent media broadcasting. As noted in the concept text accompanying an installation at the Moderna Galerija in Ljubljana, Slovenia, projects of this kind ‘include methods and materials which interact directly with societal and capital systems, communicate with them, use them, and cooperate with them, as well as position themselves in direct confrontation

with them'. On the wall are images of the projected drone along with letters from various military corporations – Aydin Vector, Fibersense Technology, Interstate Electronics, etc. – expressing their willingness to supply Peljhan with all necessary information for the purchase of materials. A vitrine contains specialised engineering manuals and a few key components. Yet the work is not complete with the installation of this conceptual display. The aim is to realise the UAV, and to expose all the conditions under which such technologies are being deployed in present-day societies. As the artist explains in a lecture:

'The project has two objectives – tactical broadcasting of a radio programme over territory where broadcasting by the usual means is impossible because of military actions and civil repression, and collecting of intelligence for civilian purposes. The second objective is of course in collision with all the legislations in the world, but I and an entire culture are certainly interested in how to maintain a degree of civilian control over very aggressive and self-reproducing systems of social repression which use these same methods to keep us under their thumb.' (1999)

All of Peljhan's work deploys rigorously conceived socio-technical systems as vehicles to gather information about military and corporate technologies, even while initiating their conversion to civilian uses. Today, after multiple iterations of the tactical UAV concept under the shadow of increasing security panic, he has carried out the first test flights. Can anyone predict what kinds of knowledge – and what levels of controversy – will be generated by the confrontation between the *Trust-System* and the increasingly secretive military systems of our supposedly democratic societies?

To define the boundaries of an aesthetic system is to determine both a threshold of visibility and a potential for interaction. This has been the artistic principle of the Yes Men for over a decade, in interventions typically based on the creation of fake websites spuriously mirroring the claims of real corporations or bureaucracies. Email requests for interviews or conference presentations then

open up situations of apparently normal collaboration, morphing into bizarre and ambiguous confrontations when the group's satirical performances begin to take over the scene (often through the display of outlandish accoutrements such as the 'Employee Visualization Appendage' or the Halliburton Survivaball').² The aim is always to cut through commercial or bureaucratic rhetoric to reveal the unstated but imperious drive for profit at any cost, which dictates corporate and governmental behaviour under neoliberalism.

The more confrontational forms of tactical media all work out some variation on the systems aesthetic, in configurations that range from predominantly symbolic display to more pragmatic forms of political intervention. In a particularly impressive project, Trevor Paglen mobilised an existing network of amateur plane-spotters to gather information about the CIA's extraordinary rendition program, which he then published in book form with a professional journalist (Paglan & Thompson 2006). The Institute for Applied Autonomy subsequently produced a striking visualisation of Paglen's information, with the work *Terminal Air* (2007); but they have also made protest tools such as the *Graffiti Writer* (1999) or the eminently practical *TXTmob* application (2004), which helps demonstrators to share up-to-the-minute information about police deployments via mobile-phone messaging.³ On the level of Internet activism, Übermorgen launches elaborate applications such as *GWEI – Google Will Eat Itself* (2005), which enlists web-users to probe the obscure operational routines of the tentacular search-engine portal.⁴ And at street level, an anonymous group posing as the Chicago Housing Authority transformed the slogan 'This is Change' into 'This is Chaos', dressing up as municipal workers to install an astonishing poster series in the city's own display spaces (2005). The bright orange posters denounced the elimination of much of Chicago's low-cost housing by the authority charged with protecting it, deftly exposing the truth papered over by an expensive Leo Burnett advertising campaign.⁵

The list could go on and on, but in this context it clearly has to culminate with Critical Art Ensemble, whose projects have typically taken the form of

staged laboratories inviting the public to gain first-hand experience with the increasingly pervasive effects of biotech. Their research into the history and present development of biological weapons touched off a veritable security panic, plunging the artist Steve Kurtz and the university professor Robert Ferrell in a four-year 'bioterror' trial that galvanised widespread support for the freedom of both artistic expression and scientific research. In this case, an aesthetic system clashed directly with the US government, generating a wealth of penetrating insights into the control structures of authoritarian neoliberalism, but only at the price of a long and exhausting ordeal – which fortunately ended with the withdrawal of all charges.⁶

So what are the current prospects of the systems aesthetic in its most provocative and confrontational forms? The lessons of recent years are clear: the security obsessions of contemporary societies inevitably give rise to proliferating zones of secrecy, both at the heart of the increasingly militarised states and in the dispersed and labyrinthine worlds of the transnational corporations. Two imperious justifications – the pressures of economic competition and the demands of sovereign defence – lend a perverse legitimacy to what would otherwise be manifestly undemocratic practices. Artistic interventions are one way to probe these 'black worlds', in order to extract information and to offer tangible aesthetic images of what can no longer be seen. Public art institutions should support and distribute such projects as part of their civic mandate. But critical artists and activists will always have to work far in advance of the institutional mainstream, adopting the formats and guises that allow them to grapple with the invisible.

A great example is the Public Netbase of Vienna, an electronic arts centre that initially configured itself as an Internet service provider to explore both the potentials and the traps of the emerging information society. After twelve years of original and challenging projects, including work with most of the artists I've cited here, Netbase refused to neutralise itself and was finally forced out of operation in 2006 by pressure from the municipal authorities. Today parts

of the former team run the 'Global Security Alliance' – a satirical performance festival exploring the paradoxes of security panic and 'cultural peacekeeping'.⁷ Another project involves the technopolitics of information-retrieval and data-mining.⁸ And in collaboration with the group Kuda.org based in Novi Sad, they have just published an anthology of Netbase projects in the form of a jet-black monolith, recounting a decade of hands-on research into aesthetic systems. The name of the book says it all: *Non Stop Future*.⁹

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NOTES:

1. Of course there are historicist readings, like Luke Skrebowski's 'All Systems Go: Recovering Jack Burnham's "Systems Aesthetics"' (2006). Too bad they remain on the safe terrain of art history.
2. <<http://theyesmen.org>>.
3. <<http://www.appliedautonomy.com>>. See herein, 'Implausible Deniability'.
4. <<http://www.ubermorgen.com>>. *GWEI* was a collaboration between UBERMORGEN.COM, Alessandro Ludovico, and Paolo Cirio.
5. Documentation of this intervention can still be found at <<http://web.archive.org/web/20070405175219/http://www.chicagohousingauthority.net>>.
6. See the analyses of the case and its implications at <<http://www.caedefensefund.org/overview.html>>.
7. <<http://global-security-alliance.com>>.
8. <http://world-information.org/wii/deep_search>.
9. See (Curcic & Pantelic 2008).

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