THE DATA TOPOS
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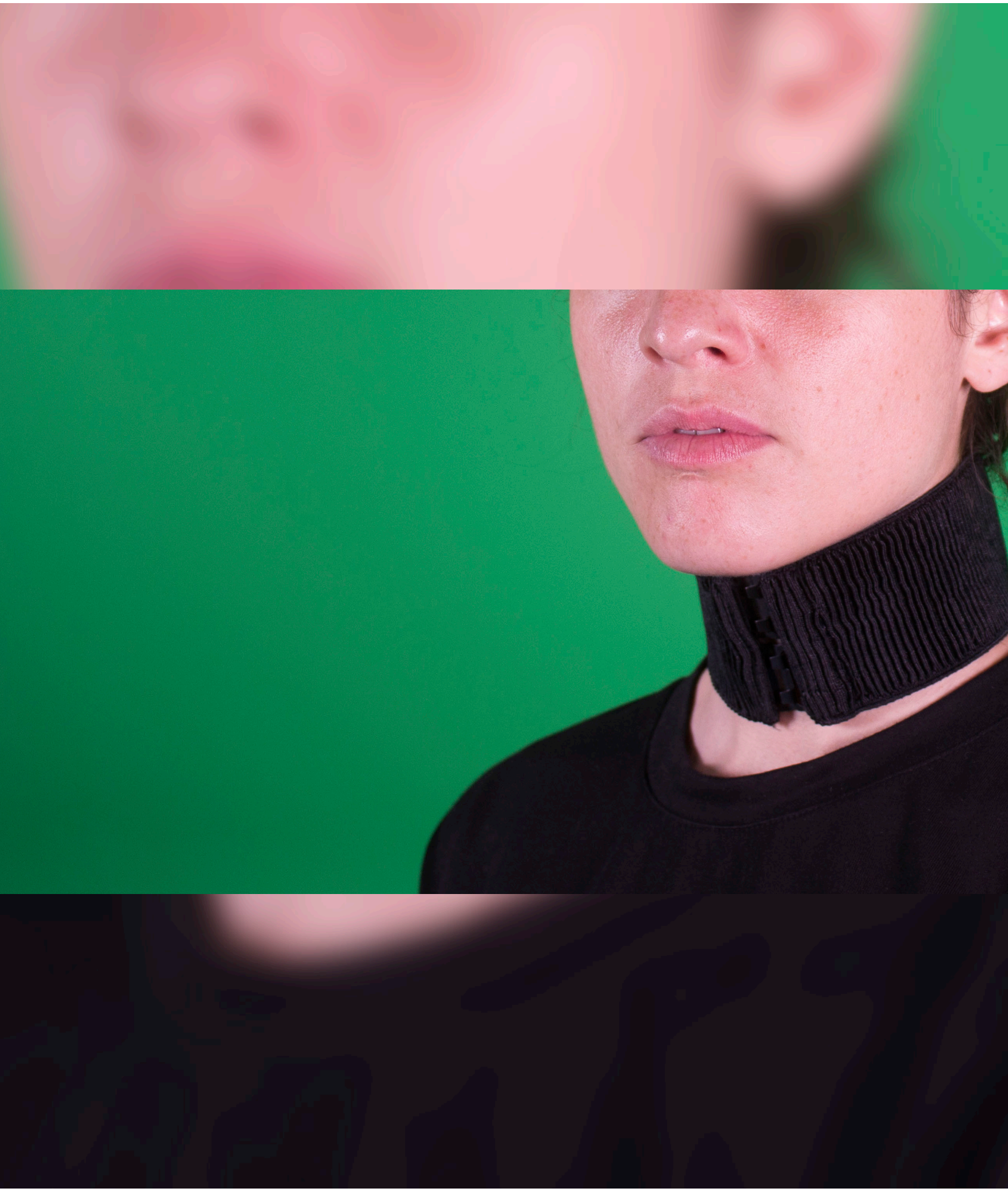


PERDITION
INTRODUCTION

PERDITION

You LogIn and take one step forth. Around the corner interpellation awaits. Waterfalls of monetized desire, lush gardens of commercial products, an overgrown landscape networked by thought and command, both “natural” and artificial. In this place time loops and spaces converge violently. Matter retreats, giving way to the promise of a dream: a high-functioning, accelerated, seamless synthesis of the id with the object. The self and the other quantified into high-speed clusters of bytes. To inhabit the online is to transcend matter without fully escaping it. Contingent immersion for the price of the occasional short-circuit. In this environment, as framed by the luminescent screen, veracity morphs and fluctuates. The encounter is reduced and enhanced simultaneously. Scale expands and implodes across non-measures of distance, magnified and minified. Once uploaded, knowledge and experience are dislodged and translated throughout infinite strata of computational virtuality. Universality held together by ethereal architectonics. Below the surface-grid of this land lies the mirrored superstructure of above, mining its way ever deeper through the online subconscious. In the underground of digital space one encounters a different panorama, operating outside the moral accord which rules above. Voluptuous industry filters through the soil extracting pure capital, stripped of ideological co-dependance, at the other end. Dripping from the ceiling, it accumulates into wild streams of deregulated demand and clandestine supply. These otherworldly places are ramified through and encapsulated within the racks and rows of materialized electronic computation, ceaselessly transmitting and receiving. The server room is where a multitude of dimensions exist in unison. The emerging complexity of this ecology is a promise of metacognitive, self-sustainable, limitless documentation and development through automation.

The free flow of digital data is not only used to document the complexity of life and human activity, but also—increasingly—as a means to predict

and regulate this complexity. The urgency of acknowledging the role of data as an exhaustive framework through which encounters are perceived, analyzed and controlled must be exerted as a means of identifying the problematic and unwanted peculiarities of expansive reliance on different criteria of information. The issue which makes data and its dynamics innately unobtrusive is the lack of materiality and therefore visibility. Alexander Galloway's *Interface Effect* analyzes the ontological renunciation of matter inherent to data:

"To say that data have no necessary information, that they are formless, existing prior to formation, the mere stuff of the world, the raw material of measurement and nothing more—to say this puts data on the same ontological footing as a number of previous concepts from the history of philosophy including Aristotle's material cause, Spinoza's substance, Whitehead's actual occasions, Badiou's pure multiplicities, or Deleuze's intensities on the surface of the One. […] It merely states that form is not logically included within data, in other words, that data may appear without form."

If the ethereal nature of data is part of the reason why it emerges and travels unnoticed, the goal may lie in making its dynamics more perceivable to the senses. The potential for data to allow the exertion of ominous ideals sets the tone for the following inquiry:

- **To which extent is data defining a shift towards pervasive means of regulation?**
- **What are its applications? Where is it converging?**
- **How can data be made more comprehensible?**
- **What sort of narratives are emerging from current digital culture?**
- **How reliable is the collected information in relation to its application?**

[12] The following cases are an attempt at localizing some of the various uses of data in regards to mass-surveillance, social analysis and regulation, political and commercial marketing, and its employment within emerging forms of finance. The underlying context for the methodology of the inquiry is also constituted by different narratives, either historical or pertaining to various delusions, which define the discourse of technologies using personal data and ultimately offer means of hypothesizing on future potential of its application within an array of fields and situations.

All Watched over by Machines of Loving Grace

I like to think (and
the sooner the better!)
of a cybernetic meadow
where mammals and computers
live together in mutually
programming harmony
like pure water
touching clear sky.

I like to think
(right now, please!)
of a cybernetic forest
filled with pines and electronics
where deer stroll peacefully
past computers
as if they were flowers
with spinning blossoms.

I like to think
(it has to be!)
of a cybernetic ecology
where we are free of our labors
and joined back to nature,
returned to our mammal
brothers and sisters,
and all watched over
by machines of loving grace.

UTOPIA VS. DYSTOPIA
METHOD & CONTEXTUALIZATION

UTOPIA VS. DYSTOPIA

The digital realm has been spilling into daily reality for quite a while now—bodies being intercepted and translated by sensors, environments constructed around feeds and walls and interactions reduced to thumb signals, content synthesized by the alternative fact and the dank meme, overgrown storage accounts asking for upgrade, algorithms predicting the future. Even the most severe form of technophobia does not allow for non-participation to occur on every level of the Database. The flow of data is contingent to an overabundance of systems, from the point in which it surfaces as raw information, to its classification and analysis, and finally towards its application within social, economic and political contexts.

Although the origins of modern communications technologies have deep roots in cold war paranoia and subsequent military intelligence tactics, the advent of the World Wide Web has sparked visions of Utopia within idealists across nations. In the mid-1990's John Perry Barlow found himself compelled to articulate a coherent statement in response to president Clinton signing The Telecommunications Act of 1996, thus extending the tradition of government regulation over the unspoiled territory of the Internet. His adverse reaction came in the form of a proclamation urging towards the recuperation of the online realm as a Promised Land evaded from secular dilemmas such as political corruption and financial error. His vision of social renaissance through the emerging digital commune resonated with many akin who recognized the potential for Utopia by way of the Internet. The mechanisms of discourse employed in his *Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace*, to fend from the nation-state's instinctive appropriation tendencies, describe a sort of national myth in themselves. Inhabitants of the online community stand together in meta-citizenship against government legislation of any kind. This elevated society would thrive as a negation of the physical realm from which it sprang. Liberated


Welcome to
CYBERSPACE
POPULATION: 1,700,000,000 AND GROWING

from the shackles of worldly lament, as evoked by Barlow, this commune would benefit from the utter freedom of self-regulation through the open feed-back which was inherent to the World Wide Web. The revolutionary synapses sparked within this digital form of collective consciousness pledged to usher in a new age of liberal progress:

"We will create a civilization of the Mind in Cyberspace. May it be more humane and fair than the world your governments have made before."

Following from Barlow's hunch of imminent oppression, Internet utopians everywhere have since witnessed in despair upon the degenerative process through which the online has become less and less of a socialist haven. Through the rejection of political authority enforced by a ruling class, digital networks were originally invested with the ideal of redistributing power within the web of commons. Today's online experience indicates otherwise. While governments strive to surveil and legislate online behavior, it also ends up generating capital harvested mainly by hegemonic corporate entities. Romantic forms of early Internet ideation have been successfully misappropriated or driven into obsolescence. Digital proto-structures such as Usenet have been left behind to fester in their lack of convenient centralization, as mainstream social media conglomerates seek the literal captivation of the user. Clouds now accumulate condensed data, yet they never precipitate without payment.

The image evoked by Carmen Hermosillo in her 1994 essay *Pandora's Vox: On community in cyberspace* contributes to the process of disillusionment regarding the progressive perversion of the Internet. Known primarily through her online moniker humdog, Hermosillo's writing describes the commitment of her initial web activity in contrast to the degenerated application of cyberspace standards. She goes on to disparage the supposed allure of the online realm by

portraying it as an epitome of simulacra, where extortion ensues by means of surveillance, censorship, and oblivious participation in self-commodification. Therefore she situates accountability in regards to a corrupt state of cyber-affairs both on the heads of those of who structure and regulate the web and on the users who bask in its globality. The ideal of the online community is dismantled once again under the thrust of capitalist appropriation. As humdog elaborates further, the prevalence of symbolic-value over worth-value is precisely what drives the negligent cooperation of Internet users towards commodifying their online testimonials. In this sense, surveillance occurs together with and is enhanced by self-commodification.

Zygmunt Bauman points out the following phenomenon in his conversations with David Lyon, captured in their book *Liquid Surveillance:*

"On the one hand, the old panoptical stratagem ('you should never know when you are being watched in the flesh and so never be unwatched in your mind') is being gradually yet consistently and apparently unstoppably brought to well-nigh universal implementation. On the other, with the old panoptical nightmare ('I am never on my own') now recast into the hope of 'never again being alone' (abandoned, ignored and neglected, blackballed and excluded), the fear of disclosure has been stifled by the joy of being noticed."

The historical interplay of Utopia and Dystopia has had an important role in producing the types of necessary fiction for speculating on potential futures while considering a present scenario. A process of ideation, starting either from an optimistic or a pessimistic stance, is what drives progress into a certain direction. The importance of fiction when it comes to the endeavor of design cannot be easily dismissed—which would explain the feeling of even the corniest of sci-fi narratives becoming reality. Present-day discourse around

technological development serves to foster a positive attitude towards fully embracing the so-called improvements it may bring to daily life. Silicone Valley doesn't seem to disappoint when it comes to launching bids for a plethora of smart products powered by seamless functionality and the data that consumers provide through usage. Crowdfunding initiatives such as Kickstarter have become a superabundant platform for solutions to daily drawbacks. These supposed solutions rely on thorough self-quantification as a means of generating data to be tossed to and for devices, in order to insure the necessary feedback loops for these technologies to function. A mattress that regulates airflow and temperature to promote better sleep, a coffee filter that brews hot beverages in accordance to the user's behavioral patterns, a door lock that secures one's home while away—and much more, everything facilitated by a slick interface framed on the screen of one's smartphone or tablet. Everyday household objects have become invested with a kind of power which has become too mundane for the individuals using them.

Regardless of which product is being promoted as the answer to all one's problems, the type of language being employed always seems to revolve around terms such as **convenience**, **security**, and **control**. Therefore, the notion of Utopia—as something attainable through the use of these smart products—is constructed upon compulsive obsessions and anxieties which are sustained by the tech enterprises themselves. Each and every product which surfaces on the market relies on the appetite of its consumers and thus desire is fabricated around it from square one. This desire is always directly addressed, highly precise, and therefore non-interchangeable. In the fantasy realm of Silicone Valley the aspect of controlling life in its most minute details simultaneously means making the assumption that individuals are constantly at risk of either being attacked, coerced, double-crossed or simply not in control of a given situation. It is precisely this constant feeling of fear and mistrust verging on paranoia that mainstream media also nurtures and thrives on. But there doesn't seem to be much consideration for these anxious types of

perception as being misdirected. While the Internet of Things creates an impression of control and safety by providing a convenient infrastructure where each device becomes a node in a vast network, broader forms of power and constant monitoring can be exercised by entities external to the individual.

Tim O'Reilly, media corporation CEO and fervent tech-utopian, proclaims the following in a chapter of *Beyond Transparency: Open Data and the Future of Civic Innovation*:

"It's time for government to enter the age of big data. Algorithmic regulation is an idea whose time has come."

The notion of algorithmic regulation, a term which O'Reilly himself coined, supposes that the means of control enacted by governments can be perfected by merging them with sophisticated means of data analytics. This conjoined form of government, as O'Reilly poses it, would strive for reaching a so called 'desired outcome' through 'real-time measurement' and periodic verification and adjustment of the algorithms' performance, ultimately reaching a state of 'ultrastability'. In this sense, data dynamics as a form of government has recently been implemented in the People's Republic of China. Since 2014 the Chinese government has been in tight collaboration with the Ant Financial Services Group, a branch of the Alibaba conglomerate, to develop the Sesame Credit social scoring system. As a form of socio-political ideology, this system is justified by government authority as an incentive which cultivates the idea of trust:

"[…] Expand rewards and propaganda strength for trust-keeping acts. Grant rewards to enterprises and model individuals keeping trust according to regulations, broadly propagate them through news media, and forge a public opinion environment that trust-keeping is glorious. Development and reform, finance, banking,

codeine cris 🍼

@BLVCKIST

so i got a notification from our security camera that someone was at the front door

5:22 PM · 19 May 17

environmental protection, housing and urban construction, traffic and transportation, commercial, industrial, fiscal, quality inspection, security supervision, customs, intellectual property rights and other such departments must, in the process of market supervision and public service, deepen the application of credit information and credit products, and extent "green path" support and incentive mechanisms, such as preferential management, simplifying procedures, etc., to those keeping trust."

On the other hand, the general outline description of this system also articulates the terms of penalty derived from instances in which the common understanding of trust could be breached. Constant monitoring occurs therefore in a centralized manner, but also through encouraging individual users to report any acts of deviance that they perceive, either directly or indirectly. To western eyes this mode of governing contains indisputable and blatant characteristics of Orwellian dystopia, in which mass-surveillance and regulation amount to a highly oppressive authoritarian government. But it is important to consider the Sesame Credit system as a relevant translation of Foucauldian notions of biopower into a socialist regime, which is also being applied within capitalist democracies, but perhaps not as explicit.

However, in terms of data analysis, it is important to pose the question: How accurate is the generated data and how reliable can its interpretation be? Online behavior is the subject of study in the cross-platform field of controversy analysis, which employs empirical examination around disputes regarding science, technology and society at large. Social media platforms are directly harnessing reaction from their users towards emerging events, which makes opinion susceptible to sociological classification. As Noortje Marres points out in her research regarding the methodology used in analyzing online controversy, ambiguity arises when there is not a clear distinction between the empirical object of analysis as platform-specific versus it as unbiased

content. In other words, researchers often do not differentiate their findings as data influenced by the structure and classification of the medium in which it emerges or as consistent information describing societal disputes. Since Facebook and Twitter are a breeding ground for voiced opinion, one hardly ever has the certainty that the evaluation of that data revolves around the actual issue and not on the manner in which it is packaged by the functionality of the platform.

In November 2015 the Leave.EU organization announced its collaboration with a Big Data company named Cambridge Analytica to carry out their online campaign leading towards the Brexit referendum. Based on research initiated by Michal Kosinski during his PhD at Cambridge University, Cambridge Analytica employed notions of psychometrics to conduct microtargeted political marketing towards the British public. Less than one year following from the Brexit vote, Cambridge Analytica was commissioned by Donald Trump to manage online marketing in regards to his campaign for US Presindency.
As opposed to previous reliance on demographic data, the use of psychometrics would bet on the digital footprints and online behaviors of the electorate as a much more thorough manner of campaigning. The banality of the online personality test has surfaced as a sufficiently accurate tool to determine an individual's psychological profile, measuring spectrums of Openness, Conscientiousness, Extraversion, Agreeableness and Neuroticism. Algorithmic predictions based on data generated by one's Facebook account can now provide a detailed analysis of personal information—IQ, sexual, religious and political orientation, education and relationship status. The Facebook Like has acquired a deeper symbolic value used to portray a comprehensive examination of individuality.

In addition, the hyperreal portraits constructed through the use of social media and other online services are successfully maintained by the ubiquity of the filter bubble. Eli Pariser, who coined the term in

Donald J. Trump
@realDonaldTrump

Follow

They will soon be calling me MR. BREXIT!

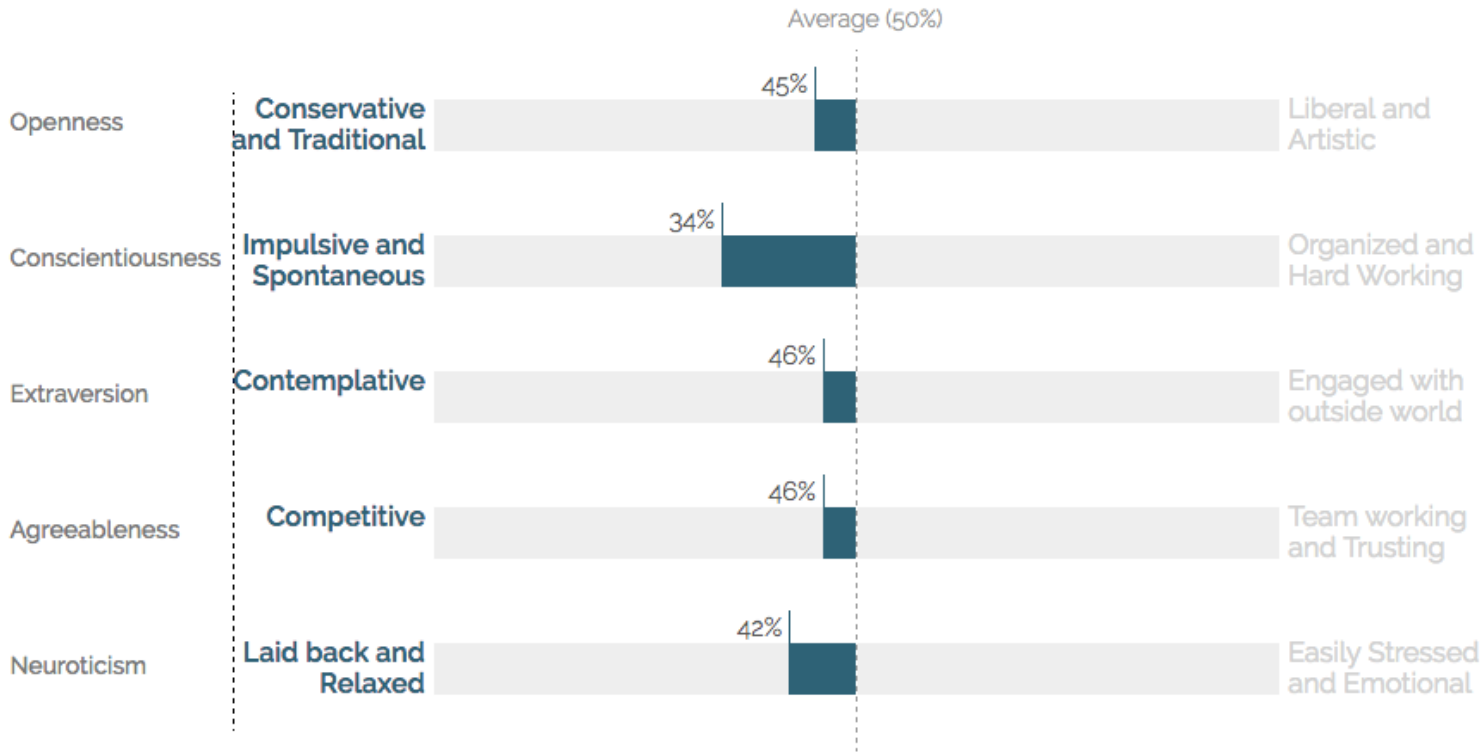
RETWEETS	LIKES
17,396	38,189

5:11 AM - 18 Aug 2016

12K 17K 38K

Big 5 Personality (Predictions are expressed as percentiles)

Take personality test



These Likes make you appear ***more conservative:***

These Likes make you appear ***less conservative:***

These Likes make you appear ***more liberal:***

These Likes make you appear ***less liberal:***

These Likes make you appear ***less involved in politics:***

These Likes make you appear ***more involved in politics:***

These Likes make you appear ***more interested in art:***

These Likes make you appear ***less interested in art:***

These Likes make you appear ***more interested in psychology:***

These Likes make you appear ***less interested in psychology:***

These Likes make you appear ***more interested in business:***

These Likes make you appear ***less interested in business:***

his book by the same name, states:

“Personalization filters serve up a kind of invisible autopropaganda, indoctrinating us with our own ideas, amplifying our desire for things that are familiar and leaving us oblivious to the dangers lurking in the dark territory of the unknown.”

Contemporary visual culture now abounds with examples of artistic commentary in regards to the prevalence of data within cumulative strata of human activity. Radical means of countering mass-surveillance and data mining arise as invitations towards individuals to decide on which side of the privacy issue they belong. Following from the advent of Wikileaks or Edward Snowden’s disclosure of NSA covert monitoring methods, blissful ignorance cannot continue to be employed as a societal excuse for lack of reaction. One way to acknowledge the ubiquity of data and its essential role in surveillance techniques, as proposed by artist Hasan Elahi, is to acquiesce in its enormity and attempt to spare it some effort by developing personal means of monitoring and making the documentation public. By appropriating sousveillance methodology, his ongoing Tracking Transience project periodically updates and publishes his location so that his digital footprints are represented as a dot on a map to be observed by anyone and everyone, not only official surveilling entities. Unfortunately such an approach relies heavily on the “nothing to hide” argument, which is inherently problematic because it fosters a passive attitude towards the behavior-regulating power practiced by the observing agency. Similarly, the debate shouldn’t revolve around the fact that everyone is innocent until proven guilty, but rather that the act of overloading servers and databases with random data, in hopes that it might serve a latter purpose, is an action prone to leaks, hacks and concealed profit. The idea that one has nothing to hide doesn’t justify this form of voyeurism entirely.


location as of Sunday 28th May 2017 02:29 PM (GMT-5)
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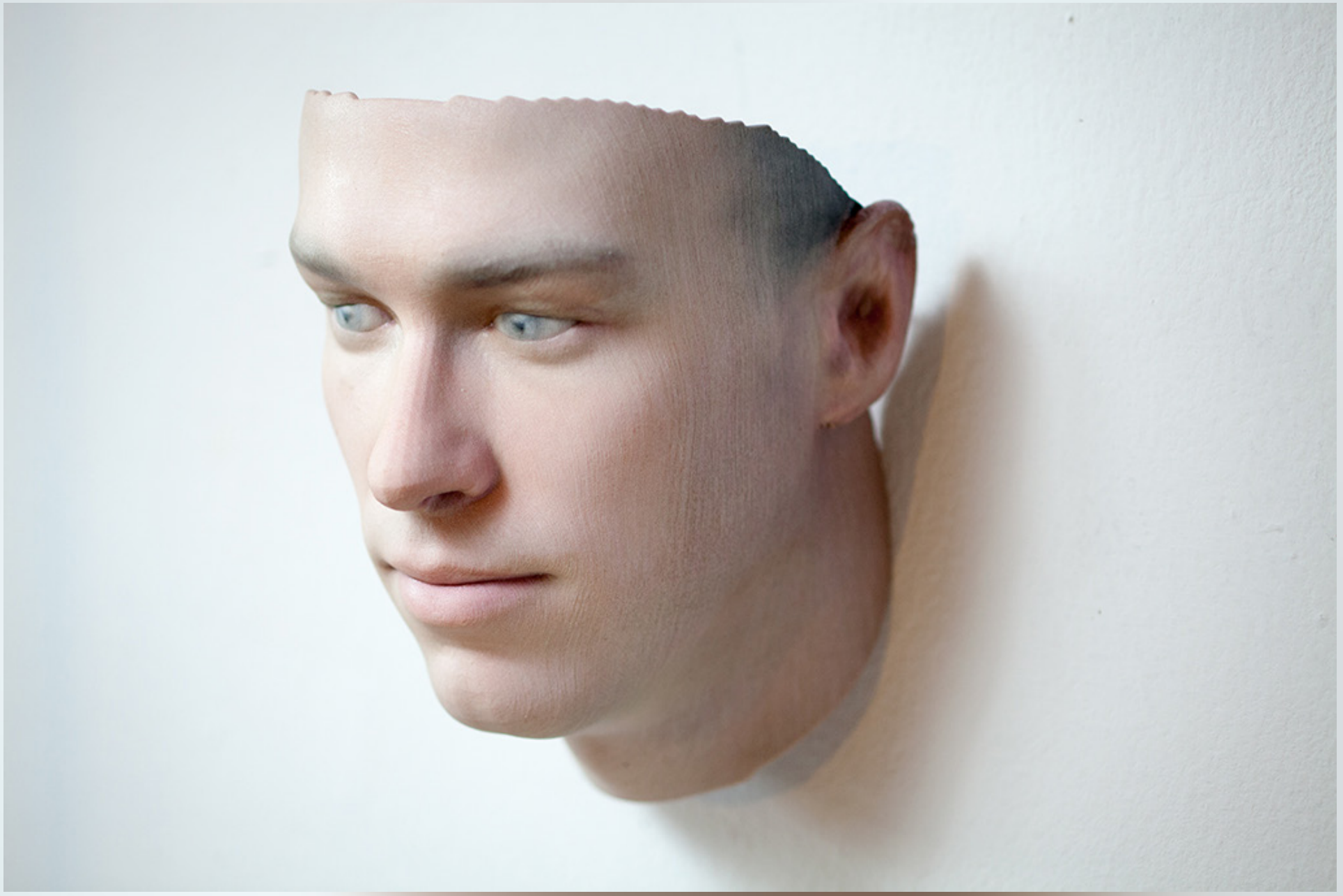
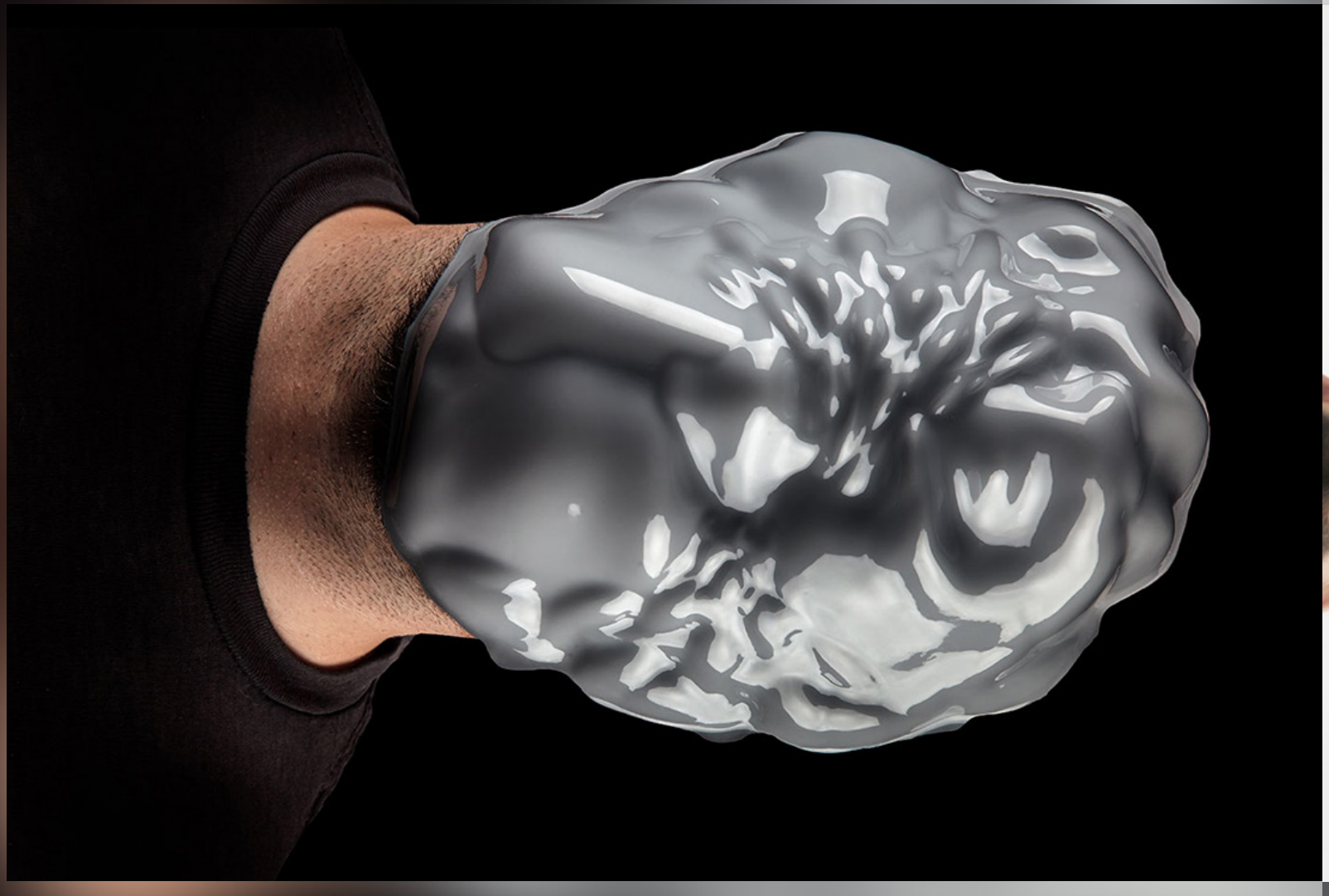


Another manner of resisting data interception and caching is to strive towards perplexing the systems which allow for it to happen by intentionally contaminating personal data. In regards to biometric surveillance, artist Heather Dewey–Hagborg uses methods appropriated from forensic science to draw attention upon footprints left behind in the form of genetic material. Her recent work comprises both visualizations of DNA samples collected from public spaces - strands of hair, chewed-up pieces of gum and discarded cigarette butts are used to reconstruct the faces of their originators as 3D printed portraits—and instructions on how one can tamper with their own bodily fluids and tissues so as to mislead any attempt at identification. In terms of facial recognition technology, the artistic practices of Zach Blas and Simone Niquille both deal with scrambled grimaces and repetitive facial features in an effort to sabotage the algorithms used to capture and categorize physical appearance. Blas' work in particular also offers commentary on the biased nature of facial recognition software by pointing towards the fact that the underlying algorithms rely heavily on ethnic profiling to determine the identity and threat-level of an individual.




Michael Jackson
Michael Jackson
Michael Jackson
Michael Jackson
Barack Obama
Barack Obama
Barack Obama

MOBILITY AT THE END OF THE LINE
RESULTS & CONCLUSION

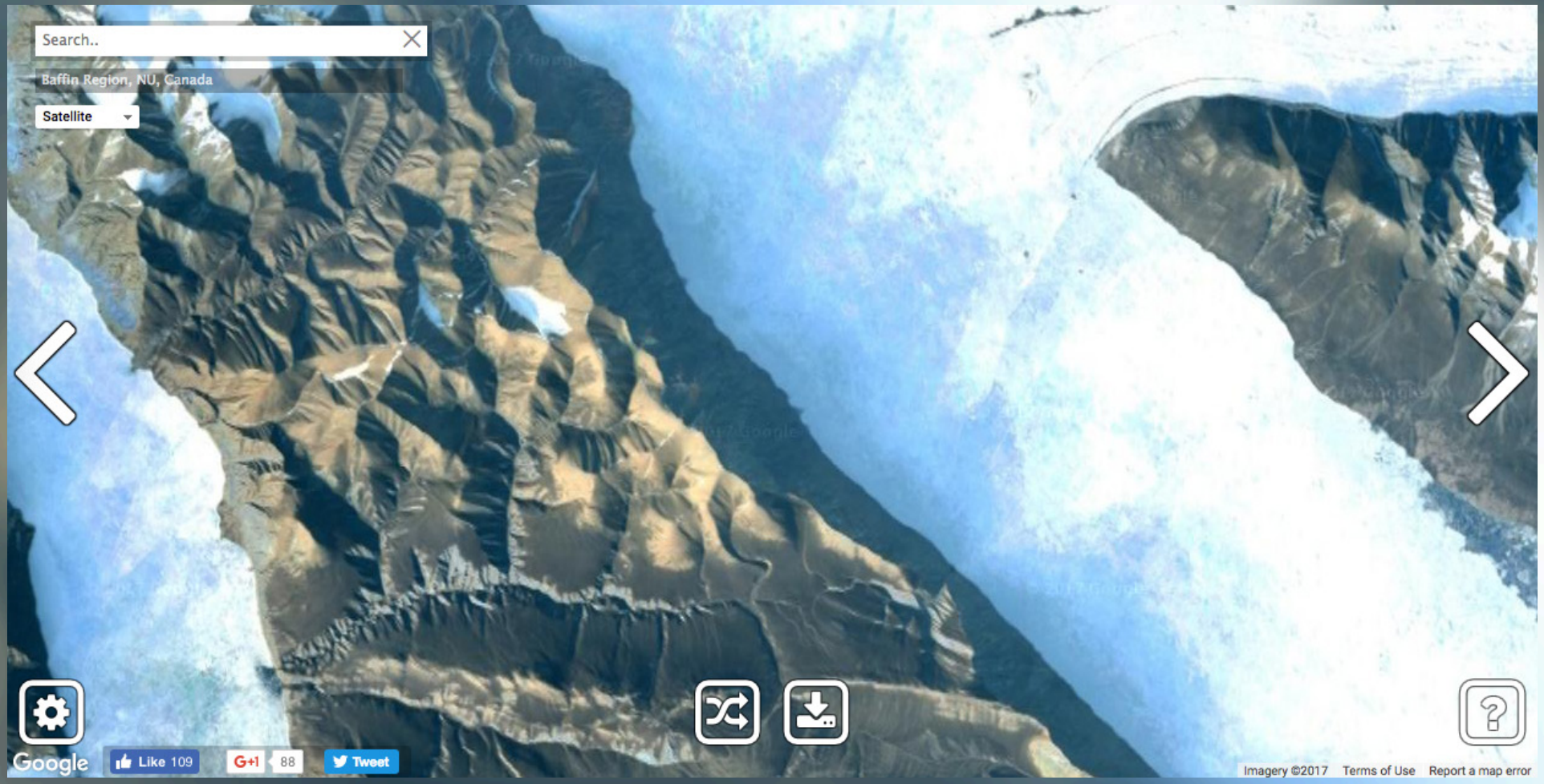
MOBILITY AT THE END OF THE LINE

Assuming that the aforementioned cases constitute sufficient plead for the prevalence of data—within situations ranging from social, to political, to economic—and ultimately its effects translated into current culture and technological progress, it appears that there is a growing need for a platform of debate around topics regarding the way data is being used. Literal methods of counteracting mass-surveillance and data mining, as described by various art and design practices, seem to propose solutions which may provoke reflection and be effective in the short-term, but which in a broader context would easily be overthrown by present and future power structures. Therefore a more appropriate tool towards deconstructing the problematic aspects emerging from data applications exerts itself in the form of fiction. In this sense, speculation offers a means of assessing the urgency of the situation at hand while simultaneously constructing a scenario which alludes to an amplified version of current hazards. A drastic outline of issues pertaining to mass-surveillance, oppressive regulation, and social divide can successfully be contained within the notion of Dystopia. As a genre ranging from literature to film and everything in between, present-day dystopian fiction is engaged with conjuring current widespread anxiety around highly palpable issues and conflicts, without relying extensively on pure fantasy.

If the prevailing sentiment would be localized in a form of angst stemming from the misuse of personal data, an extreme scenario could be employed to articulate a point of no return to be avoided entirely. In this regard, a plot is necessary. Given the matters previously described, the resulting tendency of data to be regarded as a form of capital sets the tone for a series of instances in which a market economy based on the monitoring of digital information can become deeply confining. For the sake of specificity, let's consider Google as the antagonist of the dystopian narrative. Aside from services such as its omniscient search engine, its email servers, or its disesteemed social channel, Google

also holds information on a planetary scale in the form of Google Earth—along with its subcomponents Google Maps and Google Street View. In this instance data appears through the use of location tracking technology and is represented by thoroughly documented spatial mapping. If the fictional scenario commences from the hyperreality and surveilling-potential of this environment, mobility becomes the key-component through which the individual generates data. In this scenario, every movement is monitored and regulated through the use of smart tracking devices. Travelled distance and speed would then be a form of currency, in which a certain quota is imposed, and certain destinations, as predicted by location tracking algorithms, would require mandatory visits. Failure to reach the quota or the destination would result in restricted access to mobility enhancing products and services, such as public transportation, air travel, personal automobiles et al. At the far end of the mobility spectrum lies paralysis as a form of capital punishment, administered by the same device which measures and surveils the movement of the individual. Induced inertia becomes the ultimate form of civil confinement.

The manner in which this fable of Dystopia is conveyed appropriates textual, visual and functional language from existing technological rhetoric. The Data Policy and Terms of Use serves as a complete clause of documentation in regards to how this technological ideology operates and ultimately adulterates quotidian aspects of life through mobility. Visual representations through material and video footage extracted from Google Street View purposefully creates a traversable bridge between reality and fiction. Navigation—or lack thereof—as a means of showing precise interactions with constricting aspects of Data Dystopia is encompassed in digitally mapped territory and enhanced by self-quantifying functionality. In this regard, mobility as a metaphor for financial and social sustenance successfully points towards an essential incongruence: the fact that data moves more freely within networks and across borders in comparison to the individual.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There is a growing necessity in terms of design practices to contribute and react towards contemporary rhetoric regarding progress and innovation, rather than to strive for achieving one-dimensional goals of seamless functionality and effortless efficiency. If it is becoming more clear that we are slowly entering an age of fully automated mass-production in the form of a post-labor society, the focus should also shift from simply capitalizing upon and commercializing products and services towards establishing forms of discourse around a system of ethics and potential effects of the intended notions of progress. Before norms and regulations are being spawned and conjured to enforce unverified approaches towards governance, production, or society and culture at large, a coagulated platform of debate for or against these topics needs to materialize. The exploration of dystopian narratives resulting from current issues is therefore not a peripheral method of escaping the present through mere fantasy. It is then certainly a telltale and strategic manner of demystifying truth and creating diverse commentary around it.

By posing an extreme scenario, the focus is not so much on its potential to become reality, but rather on fostering a critical approach and a means of reaction around the given topic of data. The methods of representation and referencing arising from the topic are materialized into a speculative design project meant to incite what is relatable and possibly problematic about data becoming an unshakable model for political, social, and economic ideology. Thus the answers to the inquiry posed in the introduction of the essay are supported by fact and fiction simultaneously. By evoking a scenario of Dystopia, the results of research intend to first of all debunk and counteract overly-optimistic rhetoric regarding accelerated technological development, and also to open the discussion to a wider public. By portraying data as a catalyst for censorship, oppression and abuse of power, its immateriality hopefully becomes more perceivable, more able to incite reaction and revision of behavior. The answer does not necessarily come in the form of a

 condensed solution, but rather as a point of departure towards reaching a consensus through collective deliberation and reflection.


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Map

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