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Varvara Guljajeva and Mar Canet: On Networks and the Culture of Transience

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NÉOMÉDIAS



Varvara Guljajeva and Mar Canet:

On Networks and the

The media façade of the trapezoidal FIESP building in Sao Paulo displays the image of a metronome, its pendulum swinging swiftly back and forth across an enormous digital screen made up of more than a hundred thousand LED lamps. In fact, due to its particular shape, the whole building resembles a large metronome. The scale of the device matches its purpose: it is responding to the tempo of the city of Sao Paulo (Brazil), as expressed by the interactions of its citizens on social networks and popular websites. Artists Varvara Guljajeva¹ and Mar Canet² created this project, fittingly titled *The Rhythm of Sao Paulo* (2012),³ by culling data from Twitter, Flickr, YouTube and Foursquare in order to generate a score that controls the animation on the media façade and responds in real-time to users' interactions on the Internet. The metronome is therefore the visualization of a particular kind of activity in the city: one that involves a large portion of its population, requiring a considerable amount of time and energy and generating revenue and social exchange but remains invisible.

As the use of digital technology permeates our daily life and the routines that social media companies impose become an extension of our work or a man-

datory leisure activity, being part of the global data flow is as commonplace as it is unquestioned. Every day, we share our activities, likes and thoughts on Facebook or Twitter, take photos with our mobile devices and post them on Flickr, tell others on Foursquare where we are located and participate in a myriad of other ways in the constant flow of information between servers that cover a large part of our planet. We believe, therefore, that what we do and say becomes part of a global conversation, and consequently we do not want to be cut off from what the world is sharing. This implies the need to be permanently connected to the network: a condition of perpetual online presence, as media theorist Geert Lovink puts it, which leads to the merging of our life on the Internet with our daily, physical existence. "The cyber-prophets were wrong:" states Lovink, "there is no evidence that the world is becoming more virtual. Rather the virtual is becoming more real; it wants to penetrate and map out our real lives and social relationships."⁴ The virtual metronome in the FIESP building is thus as real as any instrument measuring the temperature, atmospheric pressure or air pollution in the city. It measures the need to be connected. The pendulum swings faster as the data traffic increases, denoting





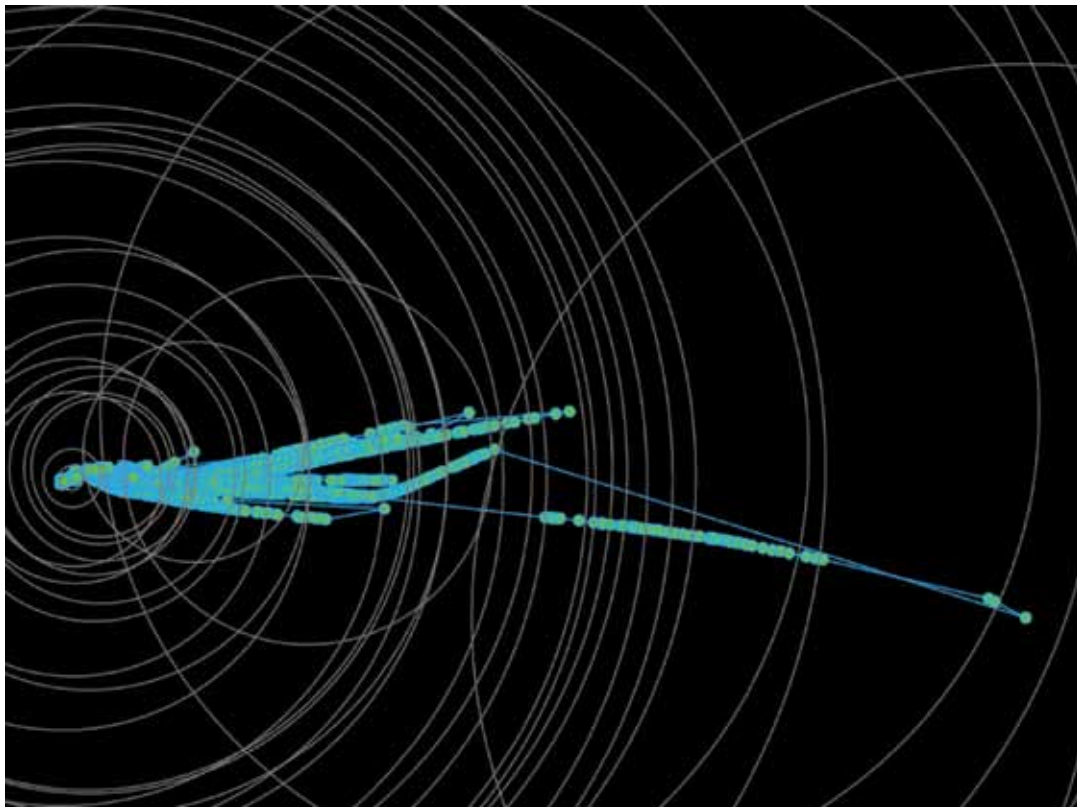
Varvara Guljajeva and Mar Canet, *Binoculars*, 2013. Urban intervention. Customized binoculars, webcams, urban screens. Concept illustration.

Culture of Transience

an increase in tempo and providing a visual indicator of Paulistas' information anxiety. The changing velocity of the pendulum reflects an increasingly important aspect of our society: the speed at which we receive, process and disseminate information. Paul Virilio related speed to power in describing the contemporary society as a *dromocracy*, but nowadays it is not just about how fast we move but about how fast we are able to react to the most recent developments. In other words, how capable we are of living in real-time. Constantly receiving information in real-time implies quickly forgetting the past and abandoning the archive. Geert Lovink stresses the fact that most social media services diminish the visible part of their timeline to the last few hours and replace the static web page with an endless flow. In this manner, the content itself is a subsidiary of the channel that provides it. News, posts, tweets, snapshots, everything is ephemeral as the permanent expectation of an upcoming event, post or image renders the present and past information obsolete. The use of networks and digital devices, as well as the need to maintain an accelerated lifestyle has brought about the development of a culture of transience, which can only be expressed by means of a real-time flow of

data. This transience also implies constant movement, a sort of nomadism that contradicts the ubiquity of the online self, a permanent point of reference wherever we go.

In the work of Varvara Guljajeva and Mar Canet, the ubiquity of the networks is confronted with the physical location of individuals and the flow of data. Their artistic projects are, in a sense, a consequence of their lifestyle as young artists who have been travelling around the world, from one residency to another, over the last two years. Location and networks determine the behavior of the large virtual metronome in Sao Paulo but are also key elements of two other projects recently developed in Seoul (South Korea). *Revealing Digital Landscape* (2013)⁵ is a publication that collects the names and locations of a large number of Wi-Fi networks in the urban area, a census that unfolds the density of Local Area Networks in the city as well as the way in which users express themselves by changing the names of their LANs. Conversely, *Wireless Poetry* (2013)⁶ consists of a device that changes the name of a dedicated Wi-Fi router to display 32-character lines of a poem by Eduard Escoffier every two minutes. The network is, in this case, the channel for a new form of poetry



Varvara Guljajeva and Mar Canet, *The Flux of the Sea*, 2011. Silkscreen print.

that mirrors the use of Wi-Fi routers as a means of expression. Again, an invisible and ephemeral process is revealed and explored in a particular location, while in fact it could take place almost anywhere else (in the so-called developed world). These projects connect the networks with a form of literature or narrative, that can also be found in *SPAMpoetry* (2012),⁷ developed in Eindhoven (the Netherlands). Spam is an undesired consequence of the global data flow, an automated monologue that the artists transform into poetry and display in several knitted garments, which are consciously made to be dysfunctional. Location is also relevant here, as Guljajeva and Canet collected spam emails from the locals, while the use of wearables takes this particular flow of data to the body, thus exposing the way in which we are immersed in it. Besides data and travellers, all sorts of goods are constantly moving around the globe every day.

Maritime traffic inspired two projects carried out in Palma (Spain) and Gdansk (Poland). In both seaports, incoming and outgoing ships constantly broadcast their location by radio waves, which are collected by AIS radar and converted into sound in the projects *The Flux of the Sea* (2011)⁸ and *Baltic Sea Radio* (2012).⁹ A sound piece in constant flux, as the artists describe it, is generated. Its changes reflect actual motion taking place at sea, as well as the presence of the data that enables the program to translate the ship's shifting location into an unpredictable score. In Palma, the routes of the ships also took a visual form in a series of silk-screen printed images that suggest an abstract composition, as well as a map and a musical score.

Tireless globetrotters, Varvara Guljajeva and Mar Canet are experiencing the world as it really is: a constant flow of events, locations, people, objects,

information and so on. Everything is transient, subject to certain motion or change. As the information society embraces the culture of transience, this condition of all that surrounds us (including ourselves) is increasingly manifest. In this context, Guljajeva and Canet's work calls attention to our interaction with the networks and our shifting sense of place. *Binoculars* (2013), their latest project, which is being developed in Liverpool (United Kingdom) for the upcoming Connected Cities Festival, ties the ubiquity of digital media with voyeurism and surveillance. In Liverpool, a set of customized binoculars will allow viewers to see a public space in another city through a networked camera; however, they will be unaware that their eyes are being captured by another camera and displayed on a large screen in that same city. This intervention will certainly disrupt, for a moment, the flow of messages from countless advertisers that conform to the urban landscape today. It will also reveal, as the virtual metronome in Sao Paulo does, that (to paraphrase Nietzsche) when we gaze into the network, the network also gazes into us.

Pau Waelder

Pau Waelder is an art critic, curator and researcher in digital art and culture. Among his latest projects are the conferences *En_lloc* (Now_Here) and *Digital Culture* (Fundacio Pilar i Joan Miro a Mallorca). As reviewer and editor, he has collaborated with several art magazines. He is New Media Editor at *art.es* magazine.



Notes

- 1 Varvara Guljajeva: <http://www.varvarag.info/>
- 2 Mar Canet: <http://www.mcanet.info/>
- 3 *The Rhythm of Sao Paulo*: <http://www.varvarag.info/the-rhythm-of-sao-paulo-2/>
- 4 Geert Lovink, *Networks Without a Cause. A Critique of Social Media*. Cambridge: Politi Press, 2012, 13.
- 5 *Revealing Digital Landscape*: <http://www.varvarag.info/revealing-digital-landscape/>
- 6 *Wireless Poetry*: <http://www.varvarag.info/wireless-poetry/>
- 7 *SPAMpoetry*: <http://www.varvarag.info/spampoetry/>
- 8 *The Flux of the Sea*: <http://www.varvarag.info/the-flux-of-sea/>
- 9 *Baltic Sea Radio*: <http://www.varvarag.info/baltic-sea-radio/>

Varvara Guljajeva and Mar Canet, *SPAMpoetry*, 2012. Wearables. Software, knitting machine.