

# Signals, statistics & social experiments:

The governance conflicts of electronic media art

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The term “governmentality,” coined some 25 years ago by Michel Foucault, describes what is essentially a feedback process: the endlessly renegotiated balances of a “microphysics of power” in which each individual contributes a vital force to the production of the social frameworks that condition his or her behavior. Under this view, power does not just come down on a population from above, that is, from the state and those whose interests it serves. Rather, it also arises from the activity of those whose invention and conviction are required to shape the prevailing usages and norms. Thus the substantial reality of citizenship, for a governmentality theorist like Nikolas Rose, does not only consist of participation in a formal “public sphere,” where enfranchised individuals debate over the dispositions and meanings of universal law. Instead, “games of citizenship” are played out in the most diverse arenas:

“The citizen as consumer is to become an active agent in the regulation of professional expertise. The citizen as prudent is to become an active agent in the provision of security. The citizen as employee is to become an active agent in the regeneration of industry and as consumer is to be an agent for innovation, quality and competitiveness... This kind of ‘government through freedom’ multiplies the points at which the citizen has to play his or her part in the games that govern him. And, in doing so, it also multiplies the points at which citizens are able to refuse, contest, challenge those demands that are placed upon them.”<sup>1</sup>

The strength of Rose's work is to have retraced in detail some of the procedures that have been developed since WWI for conceiving a population's self-conduct in psychological terms, observing and measuring its variability, inscribing it as statistics, and then calculating the effects of the government programs, advertising messages and market offers that are designed to channel it in specific directions. On one hand, these are procedures for producing the truth, that is to say, establishing so-called scientific criteria for normalizing people's behavior. But the claim being made in the analysis of governmentality is that a large degree of hitherto unsuspected freedom lies in the continually changing subjective production of that which can only be guided, directed, cajoled and seduced from the outside, i.e. self-conduct. Here is the source of the Deleuzean dictum that "resistance is primary," along with the corresponding theory of social control by "apparatuses of capture" — two ideas that have inspired much recent social theory. However, instead of just celebrating the breakthrough that such ideas effectively represent, one could ask about the specific kinds of games that we have begun to play today, in the age of the so-called new media. For our embrace, as a population, of miniaturized, networked electronic devices, has made us into avid producers of signals, emanating from all aspects of our psychic, sexual, professional, political and affective lives. These signals of belief and desire are eminently susceptible to interception, storage in databases, and transformation into statistics, which can be used as guidelines for the informed manipulation of our environment, and thus of our behavior. It then becomes important to know what kinds of social experiments we might be part of. And I will go further: it becomes important to produce counter-experiments, to up the stakes of the game, to deploy the primacy of resistance in the key arenas of our epoch. This could be a worthwhile use for the relative autonomy of the new media centers, festivals, exhibitions and educational programs. That is, it could be, if participants can find the inventions, the critical discourses and the political will to assert their autonomy in the face of their funders — i.e. the state and the electronics industries.

Consider the case of Jakob Boeskov and his pseudo-company “Empire North,” which signed up in 2002 as the sole Danish exhibitor at “China Police 2002” — the first international weapons fair in the People’s Republic. Empire North’s security product took the form of a prototype, advertised on a poster under the name *ID Sniper*. The poster, displayed at the empty stall that a trembling and uncertain Boeskov occupied at China Police 2002, contained this explanation:

“The idea is to implant a GPS microchip in the body of a human being, using a high-powered sniper rifle as the long distance injector... At the same time, a digital camcorder with a zoom lens fitted within the scope will take a high-resolution picture of the target. This picture will be stored on a memory card for later image-analysis. GPS microchip technology is already being used for tracking millions of pets in various countries, and the logical solution is to use it on humans as well, when the situation demands it...

“As the urban battlefield grows more complex and intense, new ways of managing and controlling crowds are needed. The attention of the media changes the rules of the game. Sometimes it is difficult to engage the enemy in the streets without causing damage to the all-important image of the state. Instead, Empire North suggests marking and identifying a suspicious subject from a safe distance, enabling the national law enforcement agency to keep track on the target through a satellite in the weeks to come.”<sup>2</sup>

Jakob Boeskov is an artist, a young but obviously politicized one, satirizing the excesses of his state and corporate nemeses through a radical form of what Slavoj Žižek calls “over-identification.” He took an undeniable risk to realize his project, and by his own account became almost unbearably afraid when, for instance, a French diplomat saw the impossibility of the weapon, given the damage it would inevitably cause to the internal organs of protesting citizens. Nonetheless, the heart of his proposal — the miniature radio frequency ID tag to be injected in the bodies of the demonstrators — is quite real. It is produced by a company called “Applied Digital Solutions.” It is sold under the trade name “VeriChip.”<sup>3</sup> It is offered in several different packages: “VeriTrack” for continuous surveillance of mobile materiel and personnel; and “VeriGuard,” an implanted, infra-cutaneous access badge which “cannot be forgotten, lost or stolen.” Verification guaranteed. This bit of silicon and wire is a technology for producing effective truth. And as of October 13, 2004, it has been cleared by the

American Food and Drug Administration for health-care use in the United States.

The chips are supposed to provide “easy access to individual medical records.” But that apparently benign application could smooth the way for others, as is so often the case with surveillance technologies: “Applied Digital Solutions of Delray Beach, Fla., said that its devices, which it calls VeriChips, could save lives and limit injuries from errors in medical treatment. It hopes such medical uses will accelerate acceptance of under-the-skin ID chips as security and access-control devices.” Of course, Old Europeans will rest assured that only the U.S. could condone such a barbaric idea, developed for control and security. On the Continent it is pure pleasure that provides the necessary legitimacy: “In March, the Baja Beach Club in Barcelona, Spain, began offering VeriChips to regular patrons who want to dispense with traditional identification and credit cards. About 50 ‘VIPs’ have received the chip so far, according to a company spokesman, which allows them to link their identities to a payment system.”<sup>4</sup> One man’s whisky is as good as another man’s medicine it seems — and both are sufficient excuses to get surveillance chips under our collective skin.

The disturbing thing is how easily such invasive technologies are accepted and made into norms. Under these conditions, the work of an artist like Boeskov becomes a rare chance to actually play the governance game, by opening up a public space for refusing, contesting and challenging these new tracking and recording regimes. To make such challenges effective on a broader scale, however, at least three requirements would have to be fulfilled. First, high-risk projects like *The ID Sniper* would have to be accepted as valid and ongoing experiments within the new-media institutions. Second, controversies around them would have to be produced, with a maximum number of participants, and not only in the realms of discourse. And third, the artists involved would have to be defended, when their investigations of corporate and state experiments succeed in generating the all-too predictable repression.

## Counter-experiments

How can artists – or anyone else for that matter – possibly respond to the strategies of normalization? The obvious critique of governmentality theory is that ordinary citizens have no imaginable chance to accumulate the vast amounts of data that state and corporate actors hold on them. Their desires and usages can provide the vital thrust of an initial transformation; but subsequent expressions will unfold within the established frameworks, to the point where “expression” itself comes to feel programmed, solicited and channeled by the manipulated environment. And of course, the procedures for stacking the deck of governmentality are nothing new. Nikolas Rose goes back to the 1920s to show how the normalizing gaze of the psychological researcher comes to fall on earliest infancy, scrutinizing the gestures of the gurgling baby and recording them on film in order to produce abstracted and codified models of behavior (plates 1-3, pp. 146-49). The cool efficiency of this gaze is one of the sources of intense alienation experienced by industrialized populations in the 1950s and 1960s, always unsure of which technocratic mirror may have been installed at the heart of their subjectivity. A 1974 installation by the artist Dan Graham, under the title *Present Continuous Past(s)*, provides a public experience of this disturbing tension between fluid self-presence and the return of the technocratic gaze. We see our image in an ordinary mirror, where it is as mobile as life itself; but at the same time, and in the same mirror, we see a video device continually projecting a surveillance-camera recording from eight seconds before, haunting our present experience and informing it with its own capture. The question of how one will play out this game between the spontaneity of the present and the recorded traces of the past is at the center of this paradigmatic artwork, which is nothing other than a meta-model of innumerable social experiments.

It would be interesting to reconsider the production of the postwar installationists, to see to what extent the feedback loops of

governmentality became an issue in their devices. Another artist one would soon encounter is Bruce Nauman, whose long-term obsession with behaviorism becomes explicit in a late installation like *Rats and Bats (On Learned Helplessness in Rats)*, from 1988. The piece takes the form of a yellow plastic labyrinth, using video monitors (in the place of the traditional bait that lures laboratory rats through the maze) and a soundtrack of painfully loud rock'n'roll drumming (in the place of the traditional electroshock). The commercial media are staged as the determining stimuli of a social experiment. But the pathos of Nauman's art betrays all the melancholy of the objective and objectifying model; and it culminates in his anguished emphasis on "withdrawal," which is precisely the syndrome that postwar industrial psychologists sought to cure in the alienated worker.<sup>5</sup> Perhaps one would then have to extend the inquiry to the full range of artistic resistance to normalization, from the resurgence in the 1950s of concrete poetry — with its corporeal and respiratory foundation for direct human expression — through cut-up and montage procedures conceived against televisual continuity, to the political psychodrama of Oyvind Fahlström's game-pieces and the orchestrated deviance of 1960s happenings, then on to the experimental media work of artists like Nam June Paik. These are just a few of the ways that artists engage in an active resistance to formatted behavior, and in a channeling of alternatives — literally, in Paik's case, with the famous satellite-relay video piece of 1973 entitled *Global Groove*.

The examples I'm quoting here are canonical, they are found in textbooks and in prestigious white cubes. But they and many others could be used as a genealogy, leading through a history of twentieth-century art in its subtly or explicitly conflictual relation to what the sociologist Alain Touraine once called "the programmed society." What could be recovered from such a genealogy is the symbolic and practical antagonism that pits one kind of social experiment against another. This is the kind of game that can unfold within the computerized media, where the contemporary forms of data-gathering are practiced, and where the new control regimes are being imposed, through the use of truth-producing devices like the VeriChip. But an interesting conflict

rarely just happens — particularly since contemporary art itself has now been normed, organized, channeled into the safe-havens of museums. The debate must be created, extended, deepened and resolved in public, where the issues themselves exist.

## **Producing the Controversy**

If interventionist projects have a much greater intensity today than the purely symbolic constructions of older artistic models, it's for a simple reason: the attraction of the reality show. What matters in *ID Sniper* is the fact that Boeskop was there, and beyond that, the fact that you might go there someday soon. What matters is that the effects of the international arms economy are shockingly real. So there's no use to cry out against populism and withdraw into hermetic abstraction. Much better is the production of an intelligent event, bringing reality to a more complex and challenging level of display. Activists have always known how to do this. A great example is the projection onto the building of the World Intellectual Property Foundation in Geneva, Switzerland, of the video by the San Francisco group Negativland, *Gimme the Mermaid*, which deliberately infringes on the copyright of Disney.<sup>6</sup> The screening on the WIPO building in the context of the World Summit on the Information Society in December 2003 could hardly been more significant, where the intellectual property game is concerned. But the event itself was seen by a relatively small number of people and probably understood by even fewer; it has to be distributed. And this could be the real role of the institution in the process of contemporary governance.

Take a rare example: the Public Netbase in Vienna.<sup>7</sup> Two recent projects have been exemplary: *Nikeground*, by 0100101110101101.org, and *System 77 Civil Counter-Reconnaissance* initiative, by Marko Peljhan. Both events were held on the Karlsplatz, under conditions of semi-legality that contributed to the meaning of the display. The first went up against a powerful transnational corporation, to undercut the

norm of logo-typing that installs corporate worlds as the very earth beneath our feet. It proposed renaming the historic city square, installing a gigantic swoosh sculpture to redefine the notion of public art, and of course, providing a new style of shoe to put you into intimate contact with the transfigured ground of your existence. The second project took on the issues of sophisticated surveillance techniques as the exclusive prerogative of the state. It proposed a civilian appropriation of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) to restore the balance between the citizens and the police. In both cases it was necessary to engage with local bureaucrats and politicians, so as to push the artistic fiction into the media and prolong the uncertainty surrounding its kernel of truth. Only by sparring with private interests and public authorities, while at the same time distributing information and disinformation through every attainable channel, could Public Netbase give either of these two projects the presence they need — if they are even to begin to interfere with the ordinary games of governance. But is the media-art community capable of supporting such radical initiatives?

### **Defending the Tricksters**

The answer, on the institutional level at least, is that things don't look particularly good. Public Netbase has seen the constant trimming of its operational budget by center-left administrations, despite the promises made during its high-profile resistance to the Haider governments. Now it looks like this impressive new-media laboratory is going to definitively close its doors, having recently laid off its entire staff and ceased its operations. Meanwhile in the USA, Steve Kurtz of Critical Art Ensemble is on trial before a federal grand jury for a technicality concerning the way that he obtained a perfectly harmless sample of *E. coli* bacteria. What kind of social truth is going to be produced by that grand jury? Support of all kinds is urgently needed, because the basic strategy of such political trials is to wear out the resources of citizens over the long term, both in terms of cash and of critical attention.<sup>8</sup> At a certain point, money and expert assistance become the feedback loops that really matter.



These sorry situations are indicative of the immeasurably broader state of world affairs, which is not going to turn around too quickly. It's all very well to feel optimistic about governmentality theory, and to talk about power rising from below. But the question of what exactly happens on the way up can no longer be overlooked. Much more concerted efforts will have to be made, at a higher level of critique and political demand, if we want to keep a few experimental arenas open in the worlds of art, media and activism, to go on exploring the possibility of governing ourselves otherwise.

## Notes

1) Nikolas Rose, *Governing the Soul* (London: Free Association Books, 2nd edition, 1999), p. xxiii.

2) [http://events.thing.net/Boeskov\\_text.html](http://events.thing.net/Boeskov_text.html); also see Boeskov's site at <http://backfire.dk/EMPIRENORTH/newsite>.

3) [www.4verichip.com](http://www.4verichip.com)

4) Barnaby J. Feder and Tom Zeller Jr., "Identity Badge Worn Under Skin Approved for Use in Health Care," *New York Times*, October 14, 2004.

5) Cf. *Governing the Soul*, chapter 8, pp. 90-94.

6) The video is available at [www.illegal-art.org/video/popups/gimme.html](http://www.illegal-art.org/video/popups/gimme.html). An account of the projection, with photo links, is here: [http://216.17.145.93/news/2003/12/323\\_comment.php#329](http://216.17.145.93/news/2003/12/323_comment.php#329).

7) [www.t0.or.at/t0](http://www.t0.or.at/t0); the websites of the specific projects discussed are: [www.nikeground.com](http://www.nikeground.com) and [www.s-77ccr.org](http://www.s-77ccr.org).

8) [www.caedefensefund.org](http://www.caedefensefund.org)

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