SCAFFOLDS I CAN NO LONGER SEE

An essay by Sophia Oppel and Philip Leonard Ocampo,
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A scaffold is a temporary infrastructure used to support the production of larger architectures; ordered weavings of metal rods and wooden platforms scaled up walls, formed around what is being constructed. As a peripheral presence, scaffolds disappear from focus. Digital interfaces and artificially intelligent systems inhabit a similar position; they can uphold structures of dominance and power. The influence of infrastructure lies in the invisible decisions that determine how content is disseminated.[1] "Wherever power does not come into view at all, it exists without question. The greater power is, the more quietly it works."[2] Surveillance capitalism works silently in its algorithmic extraction and mining of personal data.

Addressing the unobserved algorithms that govern digital infrastructures and survey physical space, *Scaffolds I can no longer see* highlights the exploitative underpinnings hidden within informational apparatuses. The works of Sarah Friend, Guillaume Pascale, Shaheer Tarar, and Sahar Te question the coercive power of seamless aesthetics of consumer technologies and online interfaces that go unnoticed during daily interaction.

Sahar Te's *Listening Appears Direct Flow* (2019) materializes in three formidable iterations: two tall, velvet blue banners, a series of five speakers mounted vertically, and a semi-circle of monitors affixed with teleprompters. Te's work dwarfs the

body, taking on monumental proportions in its examination of the physical and algorithmic apparatuses that enable political oration.

Te's banners reference the interfaces of social networking sites, and are reminiscent of flags hung during speeches, forging a link between theatricality, politics, and digital performance. Opposite the flags lie monitors that emit an ultramarine glow, reminiscent of an operating system error screen. Every monitor displays algorithmically generated code, based on psychometric data mined from Facebook.[3] This encoded "speech" is shown upside-down and backwards on the monitors so that its legible facsimile floats on the teleprompters above. The monitors encircle the viewer as they view the work, rendering them the orator. Centered within the gallery, five speakers stacked in a vertical arc let out an undulating drone of distorted political speeches. Initially ominous, the sound slowly settles into a textural background, as do the structures which uphold them. The physical forms that support these objects are rendered invisible, painted white so as to disappear into the white walls of the gallery.

Framed by Te's blue velvet curtains is a grid of nine iPad minis displaying morphing interfaces, familiar yet strange. Sarah Friend's *Perverse Affordances* (2018) similarly seeks to make the design of social media interfaces and their corresponding algorithmic ordering systems hyper-visible.

Friend employs a neural network that is trained using a dataset so that it generates images similar to those it has been given. The particular "Generative Adversarial Network" used in this artwork learns from ten thousand existing images of social media interfaces culled from Friend's own profiles.[4] Creating profiles on multiple platforms, Friend scrapes her own data using Selenium, a browser-automation framework that Friend coded to take screenshots randomly on her browser. This browser navigation generates mixed metadata that complicates Friend's Google data profile; a process that acts as a subtle act of resistance, rendering Friend more difficult to track, profile, and advertise to by using one algorithmic tool to confuse another.

This aggregate merging of pixelated interfaces exists as the residual trace of a learning neural network. These videos document a process: Friend trains an neural network to understand and reproduce the structures users navigate in social media interfaces. Perverse Affordances invites us to reconsider interfaces as systems that have been designed – and the assumptions they contain (or do not contain) about the humanity of their users.

In Guilaume Pascale's *L'homme aux cameras* (2018), monitors displaying images captured from Google Street View become telescopic, magnified by Fresnel lenses overlaying their surfaces. The spectre of the nine-eyed Google camera lurks

in the form of its own shadow; a trace that is felt as the cars traverse the world at ground level. In line with Google's "fundamental logic of accumulation," Google Street View vehicles have a history of scraping personal data from private wifi networks as they drive past, including passwords, credit card information, and personal correspondences.[5] Though not explicitly shown, the traces of the camera is visible throughout the work, hinting at the lesser known mechanisms behind this surveillance behemoth.

The selfie sticks that make up Pascale's structures have become self-supporting stands scattered throughout the space, holding up small monitors instead of smartphones. The inclusion of the selfie stick as a supporting apparatus references regimes of self-surveillance that are in a constant state of flux. The work conflates methods of documenting oneself with the processes of recording the world at large.

The Jack Pine (1916-17), arguably Tom Thomson's most famous artwork, inspired a legacy of tributes and reproductions that mimic his sombre sunset and windswept tree. Shaheer Tarar's critical reinterpretation of the painting captures the similarly ominous imagery of live footage from unsecured surveillance cameras stationed across Canada, watching the landscape from coast to coast. Tarar's interactive installation — also titled *The Jack Pine* (2019) — maps the violent colonial context of the original on the digital frontier of surveillance capitalism. Much like

Thomson's rendering of the supposedly "pristine" Canadian landscape as a resource to be exploited, surveillance infrastructures employ a logic of extraction without consent.

The work pairs surveillance infrastructure with artificial intelligence; on one side, a gridded projection of live surveillance footage appears uninterrupted. On the other, the same grid of footage is run through image recognition software. Despite its threatening potential for surveilling outdoor spaces, the AI often mislabels what it perceives in the landscape: a rock can easily be mistaken for a teddy bear. Simultaneously, a camera is perched intently in the gallery, examining visitor's faces in real time, interpreting their expressions, and announcing them aloud in a monotonous voice. Tarar questions the practical implementations of artificially intelligent surveillance systems, rendering them menacing yet absurd.

The impact of these digital infrastructures, optimistically meant to facilitate interconnectivity, is more sinister in practice. The work of *Scaffolds I can no longer see* function as a necessary countermeasure against these threats. The artists reflect on the ease with which networked citizens engage with platforms that treat data as a commodity. The "I" in the exhibition's title addresses the intimate, individualized way that power is mapped and internalized in surveillance capitalism; we collaborate with machine operations in a way that perpetuates our own exposure to a panoptic control society.[6] By

re-imagining the tools of surveillance, this exhibition seeks to return agency back to the user, challenging the "neutrality" that masks manipulative political motivations.

Notes

1. Keller Easterling. Extrastatecraft: The Power of Infrastructure Space, Verso, 2014. pp. 13.

2. Byung-Chul Han. Psychopolitics: Neoliberalism and New Technologies of Power, Verso, 2017. pp. 13.

3. Lauren Fournier. "Sahar Te: Listening Appears Direct Flow," University of Toronto MVS Studio Program Graduating Exhibition Brochure. April 17–May 18, 2019.

4. Conversation with the artist.

5. Shoshana Zuboff. The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The fight for a human future at the new frontier of power. Narrated by Nicol Zanzarella, Hachette Audio, 2019. Audiobook. Track 5, 40:45.

6. Byung-Chul Han, Psychopolitics, pp. 8.