

Carte Semiotiche 2024/2

Interfacce

**Forme dell'accesso
e dispositivi d'intermediazione**



**la casa
USHER**

Carte Semiotiche

Rivista Internazionale di Semiotica e Teoria dell'Immagine
Annali 11 - 2024/2

Interfacce. Forme dell'accesso e dispositivi d'intermediazione

A cura di
Valeria Burgio e Valentina Manchia

SCRITTI DI
BEATO, BELLANTUONO, CESARO, CIARAMITARO,
FEDERICO, REYES, SANFILIPPO, VIGNALI
ZANNONI, ZINGALE, ZINNA

la casa
USHER

Carte Semiotiche
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Fondata da Omar Calabrese
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3x3x6: Control Strategies and Surveillance Art

Laura Cesaro

Abstract

Through the a-prospective nature that defines the control system, there is a shift from biopolitics to psycho power — a force capable of infiltrating and intervening in processes. This transition operates through sensitive interfaces, which actively engage with bodies and in relation to them, transforming heterotopic spaces into arenas of action and interaction. Data mining, emerging from interaction with these interfaces, unveils individual and collective behaviour patterns. Control also reconfigures the viewer, who, by interacting with the sensitive interface, transforms into a user. Among the various encroachments highlighted by surveillance studies, the approach proposed by surveillance art offers critical alternatives to the dominant applications of surveillance technologies.

Keywords: Video surveillance, Social media, Synoptic gaze, Control, Surveillance art.

1. Control Strategies

#dancingisnotacrime: July 2018. Eighteen-year-old Maedeh Hojabri was arrested in Iran for posting on her Instagram account videos that were deemed immoral. Hojabri had used a smartphone camera to film herself dancing to pop and rap music in her bedroom without wearing the hijab. Touraj Kazemi, head of Tehran's cyber police, stated that his forces were monitoring all popular Instagram accounts that «promoted indecent female dances!»¹ and that the authorities would have reacted to such activities. In subsequent statements, the cyber police clarified that sexual crimes can have a digital nature: the punishment is not for the act itself but for its online dissemination. Upon her release, the girl appeared along with other former detainees on an Iranian television program, where she was forced to confess her 'guilt', a tactic often used by Iran's religious authorities to publicly discredit people who have challenged the regime's strict rules. Her social account was, of course, suspended at the time. Hojabri would open a new one in December of the same year, quickly reaching about 700.000 followers². The popularity of the social space opened by the activist gained significant visibility thanks to global attention from the press and the movement that formed in the following days.

A few days after Hojabri's arrest, dozens of women (both Iranian and foreign)

flooded the Internet with videos of themselves emulating her dance moves in solidarity, posting them as social content with the hashtag #dancingisnotacrime³. In one post, a woman states that she prefers «prison rather than being ‘imprisoned’ in her bedroom⁴», highlighting the continuity between the prison regime, the gender norms that confine women to the domestic sphere, and the Internet. The violence created by this regulation has then led to the construction of a collective e-transfeminist subject, which, thanks to the creation of the hashtag, began to act by channelling part of a struggle, welcoming and remixing the images posted on the Internet in solidarity.

The movement’s prolonged echo created a series of social discourses related not only to education, morality, and freedom of expression but also to the issue of control over (and of) the body, starting from shared contexts of action like social media. Indeed, two elements contribute to the reconstruction of the cited case: the video footage made by the girl with her technological support and the Iranian government’s repressive control over its citizens’ private accounts.

The symbolic charge of the enormous amount of images generated by the event was undoubtedly the spark that led Shu Lea Cheang to make it the central nucleus of her installation for the 2020 Venice Biennale. In *3x3x6*, the artist appropriates the same images generated by the #dancingisnotacrime movement and makes them the pivot of her site-specific work, developing three axes of investigation: control, gender and sexual crimes.

Cheang retrieves video footage from the web, alters it, and reworks it before projecting it within a system that morphologically resembles a closed circuit; a morphing effect is activated on the dancing bodies: the body, captured in its domestic space within the screen’s frame, is scanned, indexed, and transformed into a vector. The body, stripped of flesh, becomes metadata. The almost pornographic spectacle and the control over individuality can also be activated on the visitor’s body: to keep the movement alive, the visitor can participate through an app downloadable on their phone by sending a video of their restless wandering around the artwork, thus becoming part of the morphing bodies as a user. In her reworking, Cheang stages how the control exerted by the Iranian government over the young girl’s video «leaves something behind, something that is not the thing, but a remnant of its appearance, its resemblance. Something [...] a testimony to a disappearance and [that] simultaneously resists it [...]. It is not a full presence, nor an absolute absence» (Didi Huberman 2005: 59-60). She reminds us that «it is a world where gaps proliferate, singular images that, when edited together, provoke [indeed] a legibility» (*ibidem*), but a fragmented one.

The approach implemented by the Iranian government is indeed a ‘proactive’ one based on data surveillance–data mining–and emerging from the interaction with the interface and thus in the here and now. While this is a much more economical practice than physical surveillance techniques (Clarke 1994), it is also much less exhaustive and is based on models belonging more to the predictive and simulation realm. As David Lyon, the father of surveillance studies, argues, this proactive approach is certainly the most widespread among government agencies, which are assisted by communication agencies and focus on gathering more and more information, in the belief that data accumulation can lead to complete knowledge and thus more effective prediction (Lyon 2001). The sociologist, however, emphasises how the subject is lost in the surveillance assemblage created by profiling the body into data using biometric technologies. Indeed, it bypasses

the mediating filter of human language, memory, desire, and need – the complex and fallible human subject. Essentially, Hayles traces a shift in Western thought towards the ‘erasure of embodiment’ and the view of human consciousness as disembodied information. Anthropologist Irma van der Ploeg adds another piece to the puzzle following this directive. In addition to asserting the positions of Lyon and Hayles, the scholar highlights the extremism and danger of such control: «This informatisation of the body, in turn, often negatively affects identity as such» (van der Ploeg 2003: 92). In this case, van der Ploeg refers to consequences such as Maedeh Hojabri’s imprisonment as well as the countless deaths caused by malfunctioning algorithms; consider the case of Molly Russell, a thirteen-year-old American whose anorexia-related death was attributed for the first time to the influence of Instagram’s algorithm on her mental health. Van der Ploeg continues: «With technological and discursive practices converging towards an ontology of information» (van der Ploeg 2003: 96), it is unlikely that their bond, embodiment, despite recognising its binding and limiting power, will remain unchanged. And since embodiment concerns our most basic experience of the body and being in the world, these developments have profound normative and moral implications that we should seek to uncover. Artists who can rework events and mnemonic images provide an actual demonstration of tools for uncovering the functioning of these practices, exposing how the body itself is changing as a result of new information technologies and the incorrect ways we engage with them.

2. *The Intersection of Bodies and Data in Contemporary Art*

The landscape following 2001 offers the opportunity to outline the evolution of the media imaginary, which is closely connected to the proliferation of optical devices along two different axes. On the one hand, some practices respond to the disciplining and hostile face of the political apparatus that emerged from the expose of covert government programs such as ECHELON, which became public knowledge after the revelations of former CIA agent and American whistleblower Edward Snowden. On the other hand, there is the spread of the concept Richard Grusin defines as pre-mediation, whose goal: «is not necessarily to predict the future accurately but to mobilise and regulate the affective orientations of the present – whether individual or collective – towards the future» (Grusin 2017: 156). In the use and reuse of images from surveillance archives, artistic practice (even before the filmic one) begins to recognise a function of *mediashock*, which Grusin defines as the activity of foreshadowing potential shocks comparable to those caused by 9/11. In doing so, it places its interlocutor in dialogue with the dispositif, launching them into what Gilles Deleuze refers to as a desubjectivizing ‘tangle’ (Deleuze 2007).

EXPOSED: Voyeurism, Surveillance & the Camera, an exhibition held from May 28 to October 3, 2010, at Tate Modern in London, represents a significant case. Curated by Sandra Phillips, it was conceived in five thematic sections revolving around the creation and viewing of images that deliberately crossed privacy lines: The Unseen Photographer, Celebrity and the Public Gaze, Voyeurism and Desire, Witnessing Violence, and Surveillance. Focusing on the photographic practice of figures such as Vito Acconci, Sophie Calle, and Emily Jacir, among others, the exhibited works aimed not so much at analysing how, as John McGrath states, «emerging video technologies impact artists’ studios or exhibition spaces or the

production of artefacts incorporating these technologies» (McGrath 2012: 85), but at investigating the social impact of increasingly pervasive and technologically advanced control techniques.

More closely related in time is the solo exhibition *Laura Poitras: Astro Noise* (2016) at the Whitney Museum of American Art, promoted and curated by the activist Jay Sanders. The title refers to one of the encrypted files containing evidence of mass surveillance actions by the National Security Agency, discussed by dissident Edward Snowden in Poitras's documentary *Citizenfour* (Laura Poitras 2014), a few years before the exhibition. The design of the exhibition space aimed at creating highly engaging environments where the incorporated documentary footage would prompt viewers to interact. The focus expands to mass surveillance, war on terrorism, and data leaks. Poitras's exhibited works were also consistent with those of contemporary artists who actively explore the theme of surveillance, using not only data produced by institutions and governmental structures but also qualitative data gathered by civilians.

In Italy, in 2017, the exhibition *Please Come Back. The World as Prison?* was held at the Maxxi in Rome, curated by Hou Hanru and Luigia Lonardelli (Hanru & Lonardelli 2017). The title is inspired by the eponymous work of the collective Claire Fontaine, reflecting on a world increasingly comparable to a detention space. In the curators' work, the attention to architectural spaces converged with the proliferation of data and images. The exhibition, which was divided into three sections – Behind the Walls, Outside the Walls, Beyond the Walls – started from a question about the reality of imprisonment and evolved into a critical vision of the contemporary world shaped by hyper-connections and hyper-technological practices that reduce living space into cells with movable (but non-removable) walls. Three symptomatic containers: the aesthetic panorama of surveillance configured by the aforementioned exhibition projects resonates with the same boundaries traced by surveillance studies. The exhibition events bring together only a few works on the map of the plurality of disseminated gazes, consecrating an artistic journey that began in the 1960s but was definitively consolidated in the last two decades.

The focus of the artistic reflection predominantly centres on the constraints to which bodies are exposed, primarily through the dynamics activated by the screens in contemporary daily life. To understand this phenomenon, we begin with the process defined by Vanni Codeluppi as 'vetrinizzazione', to describe the process by which individuals, organizations, and even urban spaces increasingly prioritize appearance, self-presentation, and spectacle, akin to products displayed in a shop window. The term emphasizes the growing societal focus on visibility, aesthetics, and the external image in a world dominated by media and consumer culture (Codeluppi 2007: 5). In this trajectory, Codeluppi identifies a process in which the individual transitions from consumer to product, following a solicitation for hypervisibility that instils the pure pleasure of self-exposure. This is facilitated by the versatility of the digital image and the refinement of reproductive technologies, which contribute to an aesthetic acceleration inheriting the models of the *Glass House* or *Crystal Palace*, thus shaping the social space as an exhibition space. According to the author of *Vetrinizzazione sociale*, the glass architecture that characterises these structures, with its transparency that creates relationships, becomes a perfect metaphor for the communication model that tends to prevail today, in which the ideology of absolute transparency is recognisable.

This ideology, as both a device and a metaphor, imposes a radical curvature on the subject, distinguishing between ‘displaying’ and ‘showing oneself’:

If individuals put themselves in a display window, they expose themselves to the gaze of others and can no longer escape that gaze. ‘Displaying’ is not a simple showing of oneself, which involves the possibility of retaining something for oneself; it is an act that implies an ideology of absolute transparency, that is, the obligation to be available to expose everything in the window (Codeluppi 2007: 17).

The pervasiveness of practices that activate an automatic process of tracking surveillance and facial recognition, mainly involving self-mediation, is increasingly reconfigured in artistic interventions that, exploiting these daily moments, make exhibition spaces the sites of their execution. These operate directly on visitors, who are called to experience the consequences of being observers-observed, of being carriers of digital data, and part of a monitoring device. Two fairly distinct lines of direction can be identified in this regard.

The first sees artists engaged in becoming unrecognisable to the eye: consider the 2013 work *How Not To Be Seen* (now part of the MoMA collection in NY) by German artist and theorist Hito Steyerl, a parody of a tutorial on how to escape the current regime of pervasive and continuous surveillance. Or the work of Turin-born Paolo Cirio with *Street Ghosts*, a five-year project (2012-2017) where the artist creates life-size posters, starting from the silhouettes of people in Google Street View, including his own. These silhouettes, made unrecognisable, are printed in colour, cut along the borders, and then applied to the walls of public buildings at the exact spot from which they were extracted in Google Street View. The processing mechanism is reminiscent of Canadian artist Jon Rafman’s *The Nine Eyes of Google Street View*. The artwork, constructed entirely by selecting images from the platform that gives the work its name, combines photographs taken on streets worldwide by vehicles equipped to supply the immense Street View archive, a mapping that is still in progress, into a 3D panorama. The study of interventions shows that the Italian artist has primarily worked in Western Europe and the Atlantic coast of America: in the reconstructed map, each dot opens to a detailed screen containing, in addition to the geographical coordinates, the Google link and some shots of the installation.

The second line of direction concerns artists who use digital data as a privileged field of investigation to redefine identity. These images result from the visualisation of complex data sets, images that materialise information in luminous form. These are images that Ruggero Eugeni invites us to read as algorithms, both because they are closely linked to calculation processes and because their manifestation coincides with a series of highly regulated processes such as computer algorithms. Precisely because they have such a massive computational component, he does not identify them as images from which data is derived – which we can read in the category just identified – but rather as *algorithmic images* (Eugeni 2023; 2021), emphasising the dimension of computation with which they are imbued. A primary reference in relation to how information technologies are transforming surveillance and power relations is algorithmic facial recognition. Social media, closed-circuit surveillance, border control, and targeted advertising marketing, which sociologists compare to Spielbergian scenarios, are just some of the many domains where facial recognition algorithms

are tested and implemented. This algorithmic function fits perfectly into what Virilio calls the *vision machine*, referring to technologies that have successfully automated visual perception.

Among the most recent and widely critically discussed interventions is *Machine Readable Hito* (2016) by Trevor Paglen. Geographer and artist described by The Guardian as the photographer of the «unseen political geography of our times» (Adams 2017), Paglen has engaged in a two-decade-long research project aimed at capturing not only those places unrecognised on geographical maps (from secret air and military bases to maximum-security prisons) but also the invisible flow of data that accompanies us on a daily basis. In his 2016 work, Paglen presents 360 photographic portraits taken in front of a surveillance camera of artist and art theorist of the ‘poor image’ Steyerl. The portraits, comparable to passport photos on a white background, are printed on adhesive paper and organised into forty-five columns and eight rows. Each puzzle cell is distinguished by diverse facial expressions that challenge the settings of the recognition protocols. The resulting identifications change based on the expression—closed eyes, furrowed brows—altering the percentage of ‘male or female’ identification data.

The year 2017 saw the emergence of *Probably Chelsea* by Heather Dewey-Hagborg, an artist and biohacker interested in art as research and technological critique. Her controversial biopolitical practice began gaining recognition in both the medical and the artistic field with the 2014 project *Stranger Visions*, which involved sculptures of portraits made from genetic material collected in public places—hair, cigarette butts, and chewing gum. This project led to *Probably Chelsea* (2017), which consists of thirty different possible portraits of Chelsea Manning generated algorithmically from her DNA analysis. Chelsea Manning, a former American soldier, gained public notoriety for leaking military documents to WikiLeaks in 2009. Charged with crimes against human rights and national security, she was sentenced to 35 years in prison. The thirty portraits were 3D printed and hung at various human heights in the centre of a room, allowing viewers to walk around them. The differing heights and variations in the portraits create the effect of facing thirty different subjects, with the eerie awareness that they all originate from the same genetic source. Dewey-Hagborg states that the installation was inspired by conversations with Manning about the limits of DNA profiling and the incredible movement supporting her release from prison. Genetically, we all share more similarities than differences. *Probably Chelsea* advocates a form of solidarity: at the molecular level, «we are all Chelsea E. Manning» (Hagborg 2017: 11)⁵.

The works of Paglen and Hagborg exemplify the process defined by Kevin Haggerty and Richard Ericson as surveillance assemblage (Haggerty & Ericson 2005), that is, the combination of materials produced by control and surveillance practices aimed at promoting perceptual disruption in the observer, who must disentangle the interwoven data produced by the interactive intervention. This reciprocity fits within the do-it-yourself panopticon form, as described by Zygmunt Bauman (Bauman & Lyon 2015), also known as the «Synopticon» according to Mathiesen (1997).

On a parallel axis, the continuity between the previously discussed works and those proposed here lies in the relationship established between bodies and data, precisely the possibility of extracting the former from the latter. This includes

identifying bodies within the flows that transform the population into signifiers subject to control and confronting the identities produced by the processes that contribute to de-individualization. Giorgio Agamben summarises this well when he suggests:

Nothing less than a general and massive division of the existent into two large groups or classes: on the one hand, living beings (or substances) and, on the other, the devices in which they are incessantly captured (Agamben 2006: 22).

Starting from the extreme division proposed in *Che cos'è un dispositivo?*, Agamben argues for the emergence of a third element, the subject: «I call subject that which results from the relationship and, so to speak, the hand-to-hand combat between living beings and apparatuses» (Agamben 2006: 23). This product is inscribed in the centrality assigned by the philosopher to the device, transitioning from the singular (*the* device) to a heterogeneous network (devices). From Agamben's perspective, a device can be understood as: «anything that has the capacity to capture, orient, determine, intercept, model, the opinions and discourses of living beings» (Agamben 2006: 22).

It is important to remember that within a binary living-beings-devices framework, Agamben theorises the unidirectional action of capture by the latter over the former. Regarding living beings as carriers of substances, the reference extends to images arising from these processes, which can be confined to what Georges Didi-Huberman calls *plastic forms*, bearing an analytical, cruel, penetrating, repetitive, and insistent gaze (Didi-Huberman 2014: 59). In the artistic process—a conscious effort to see and objectify the things of the world—plasticity is diminished: the subject is no longer merely looked at as a display item (body/flesh) but it is seen, laden with a nudity that is disturbed by the emergence of forcibly empathetic anxiety. In the case of Maedeh Hojabri, the Agambenian subject is reconstituted through the artistic instance, especially when the tracking operation activates in the original video published on the girl's social profile as the viewer passes in front of the screen.

So, the artistic instance leverages the element of presence that resides in the identity trace, guiding us from the event-driven regime inherent to digital users to the fixation and, thus, the assumption of a presence. When this occurs, the body becomes naked: the artist confronts us with the evidence of that process which Georges Bataille, in a chapter of *L'érotisme* dedicated to beauty, defines as the «fundamental contradiction of man» (Bataille 2017: 149), constantly balancing between the apparent irreconcilability of the desire to endure (i), to maintain the forms of being (ii), and a tendency towards the overabundance of these same forms (iii)—an example being the fragmented identity we are called to respond to across multiple platforms and social media—which, conversely, tear and lead to forms of de-subjectivization. The plurality and dissemination of devices entail an immense proliferation of subjectivation processes since the same individual can be, depending on the device they are connected to, something else, either sequentially or simultaneously, emphasising the «aspect of masquerade that has always accompanied every personal identity» (Agamben 2006: 30-31), and underscoring the system's gaps.

What defines the devices we deal with in the current phase of capitalism is that they no longer act so much through the production of a subject but through processes we can call desubjectivation (*ibidem*).

From this background, let us try to deepen the work that initiated this current study, ensuring that the short-circuit continues to be generated.

3. *You're on Camera: The Aesthetics of Surveillance According to Shu Lea Cheang*

Shu Lea Cheang, an artist and filmmaker deeply engaged with the aesthetics of social imagery, has consistently explored themes of control, mobility within environments, and individual tracking. In her works, she often employs surveillance imagery and self-representation forms linked to the concept of traces within the space of the ether, focusing on what seems to remain — the residual presences of the de-subjectivizing processes.

Cheang's significant debut came in 1999 with *Brandon*, the first piece of NetArt commissioned by the Guggenheim Museum in New York. This work is a monument to Brandon Teena, a transgender man from Nebraska who was raped and murdered in 1993. Particularly sensitive to contemporary society's challenges regarding gender representation, Cheang narrates Brandon's story in five phases, corresponding to five digital interfaces along a timeline representing Brandon's identity in polyphony: *big-doll*, *roadtrip*, *mooplay*, *thatrum anatomicum* and *panopticon*. The latter section reveals a digital panopticon of 12 cells, each housing a case that had marked Teena's identity history. The scenes and narratives result from extensive research referencing the visual and theoretical exercise of controlling bodies through scopophilic surveillance tools. The presence of doctors, psychologists, moralists, authorities, and prison officials, figures who speculate and decide how to modify the bodies of arrested subjects, assaults the viewer's gaze, hindering visual enjoyment.

Regarding this work, Cheang states that «the panopticon connects Teena's personal history with broader issues concerning the criminalisation and medicalisation of those considered sexually deviant» (Blas & Cheang 2019). Panopticon simulations are overlaid onto prisoners and virtual patients undergoing gender-affirming surgeries. She continues: «I remember visiting the former Koepelgevangenis prison in Haarlem, where you can still see the architectural structure of the panopticon; but now, society itself has become the largest panopticon. Think of data collection, facial recognition».

The narrative structure outlined for *Brandon* returns in Cheang's work for Taiwan's participation in the 2019 Venice Art Biennale. The project, *3x3x6*, is based on the decision to react to Maedeh Hojabri's story and respond to the architectural space of the Palazzo delle Prigioni and highlights these themes once again. Overlooking the San Marco basin of the Venetian lagoon, the Palazzo served prison functions from the very beginning of its construction, with rooms used by the magistrates of *Notte al Criminal*. Contrary to the exhibition catalogue's statement by curator Paul Preciado, the space was not the setting of Giacomo Casanova's famous escape from the Piombi, which occurred from the attic of the Palazzo Ducale, though this inspired Cheang's site-specific work on the theme of imprisonment, due to its impact on the collective imagination:

If you search for ‘Palazzo delle Prigioni’ on Google, the first result is that Giacomo Casanova was imprisoned there in the 18th century. This was the starting point. From here, Paul and I continued researching ten other cases in dialogue with Hojabri’s case (Cheang & Preciado 2020: 9).

In the title, $3 \times 3 \times 6$, Cheang references a restrictive living space of nine square meters monitored by six surveillance eyes. The exhibition path traces the history of punitive detention institutions, including the virtual prison status subjected to the surveilling eye. In designing the space (Fig. 1), Cheang aligns its composition with representing Taiwan’s complex microcosm and the image of a modern nation rooted in the past but projected toward a technologised future. It is considered a closed-circuit experience with no beginning or end. The first (or last) space is inspired by a control room, a black box from which the act of viewing and recording the actions around the artwork is controlled: the heart of the movement, a miniature control room, is placed, not coincidentally, in a dark, confined space at the margins.

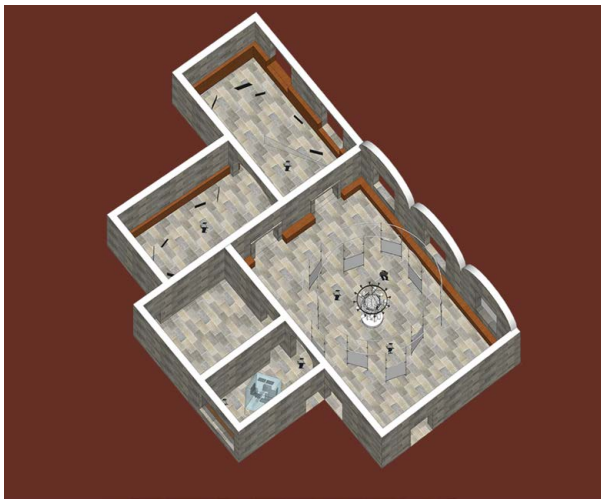


Fig. 1. Shu Lea Cheang, $3 \times 3 \times 6$, 2019, Venezia; Palazzo delle Prigioni, scheme of the organization of the exhibition space

This theme also recurs in the two rooms dedicated to ten 4K films made by the artist, each focusing on individuals imprisoned for immoral or improper behaviours linked to identity affirmation and individualisation processes. The video stations come with headphones and a QR code that links to more specific information about the protagonists, their stories, essays, articles, and news documents narrating their vicissitudes.

Lastly, we return to where our journey began: the central room of the Palazzo delle Prigioni, dominated by an inverted surveillance tower (Fig. 2). The light beams from the surveillance cameras project portraits of the ten prisoners, protagonists of the previous installation, and the scanned bodies of participants in the #dancingisnotacrime movement. Seen as an evolution of Cheang’s project for the Guggenheim, her interpretation of the panopticon as a multichannel projector speaks

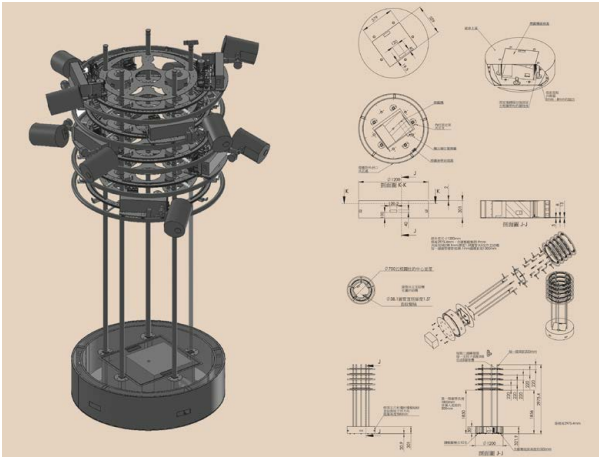


Fig. 2. Shu Lea Cheang, 3x3x6, 2019, Venezia; Palazzo delle Prigioni, hardware operation diagram.

of the ambivalence of donating one's image to control systems with consequent, automatic and inevitable body mapping, the thin line between observation and de-construction of the subject (Fig. 3).



Fig. 3. Shu Lea Cheang, 3x3x6, 2019, Venezia; Palazzo delle Prigioni.

The scanned body images are characterised by extraordinary vividness and mobility, which is striking when compared to their material counterparts, resulting from extraction and conformity processes. Each user is taken hostage: their image becomes consumable and quantifiable. As the artist declares, «morpho-facial recognition data [is used] to produce unrecognisable forms: by controlling your movements in society, the system obscures your personality» (Cheang & Preciado 2020). Examples are found in the ongoing studies on the installation's Instagram page, #threethreesix3x3x6, where dance videos submitted by users are processed. Cheang automates body movements, vectorising limbs, decontextualising the subject from the environment, reducing them to sterile moving silhouettes devoid of identity (Fig. 4): a clear denunciation of the ambivalence of watching



Fig. 4. Shu Lea Cheang, *3x3x6*, 2019, Venezia; Palazzo delle Prigioni.

and the creation of continuous and incessant body mapping to which we are subjected treating this not as a strictly bound body, but a relationally expanded one; above all, the emphasis is on the linear consequence between surveillance control and the de-construction of the subject in which we unconsciously participate, acting *with* the interface.

We're no longer working on visual algorithms. Cheang stages our relationship with the interface, considering it not merely as a technology but as an action: interfacing. A term which, for Ksenia Fedorova, primarily entails «activating the condition of the interface» in the sense of «entering a dynamic framework of relations organised into a certain procedural structure» (Fedorova 2020, 26). Fedorova recalls and outlines how the logical organisation of communication and machine-mediated experience within a given interfacing condition can create space for new experiences of the self and a renewed understanding of what can constitute the human self. In this perspective, the representation of the transmutation of social stereotypes into virtual avatars and the staging of the relationship with the interface bring forth a 'data-image-body' that invites reflection on constraints that may be physical (mechanical and robotic movements) or more complex from a social standpoint (race and disability).

The artistic form used to understand and attempt to elude the processing between devices and living beings/substances is the same weapon with which it takes shape: the alternation between action and gesture. This latter is understood broadly by Agamben with the concept of *gerere* (Agamben 2017) — in terms of support and care, differently from *facere* (to produce, to create). The artist starts from the premise that activating the interface is a lost action within a regime that frames consciousness and gestures as separate entities. The site-specific work acts as a magnifying lens, exposing both and making them subject to analysis: the gesture becomes a tool for Cheang, enabling, through the act of *intervenire* (in the practical sense of the notion), a denounced awareness. Using digital surveillance technologies and social media, Cheang employs the historical site of the Venetian Renaissance prison to create a real-time dissident interface that invites the visitor to engage. However, this 'engagement' is no longer merely a physical act. The vis-

itor's facial image is tracked and transformed into data; it is manipulated to alter the parameters associated with cultural codes of gender, sexuality and race, then reuploaded into a biopolitical database of historical and fictional faces, including those of sexual offenders. Cheang appears to structure the entire design of the space, both physical and virtual, around capturing the gesture and subsequently capturing the image via everyday control devices. The staging of data processing and the operational paradigm ensures that the visitor's gestures are no longer extended actions separated from the subject (Agamben). Visitors are no longer passive instruments; they actively engage with and assert their agency within the system.

This agency extends not only to the activation of the interface in the here and now but also to access the system digitally and asynchronously: visitors are invited to upload dance videos – simulating the movements of arrested women – into the database of videos processed by Cheang's synopticon. Using digital surveillance technologies and social media, she utilises the historical site of the Venetian Renaissance prison to create a real-time dissident interface inviting visitors in. But this 'entering' is no longer just a physical act. The visitor's facial image is tracked and transformed into data, manipulated to alter parameters associated with cultural codes of gender, sexuality, and race, and then reloaded into the biopolitical database of historical and fictional faces and that of sexual criminals. Cheang builds the entire design of the space – both physical and virtual – around *gerere* first and on the subsequent capture of the image by everyday control devices. The visitor can also digitally access the system and introduce elements that transit into the displayed images: we have mentioned the possibility of uploading dance videos simulating those of women arrested and imprisoned for posting online in solidarity.

Secondly, the artist practices what Paul Preciado defines as «narrative disobedience» (Cheang & Preciado 2020): her ways of coding and narrating oppose the hegemonic narrative. Starting precisely from the provocation that control criminalises sexual, gender, and racial minorities in the fragmentation characteristic of the de-subjectivization process, she reveals a fallacy in track-counting techniques, reworking the images obtained from the dislocated assemblage in space and further questioning the norms that have established the difference between the normal and the pathological, the real and the virtual, the socially recognised and the invisible.

In summary, on the one hand, the artistic instance allows us to highlight the persistence of what Miriam De Rosa calls the «surveillance image-space» (De Rosa 2013: 166), assigning it the capacity to «focus attention on common life situations», yet «an integral part of a fragmented, fluid, and diversified film experience»; on the other hand, it is possible to dwell on the emergence of a second vocation of video surveillance systems. The potentially transformative effects of the body-as-information exclude those 'foreign' factors that trigger personal identifiability; thus, synoptic devices do not allow for the recomposition of a new subject except in a larval and spectral form. Only the *gerere*, which the examined works shape, frames the rhizomatic action that is cyclically active on the surveilled user, making the moving image into an experience. This mediation (shock) towards de-subjectivization processes opens to a more bearable vision and to an idea of making that «techno-sensitivity tuned to our epoch» mentioned by Francesco Casetti (2023) manageable, referring not to the desire to understand but to the

«certainty [with] which we can ascertain aspects, including those that scare us and those that speak of still unexpressed possibilities»; not through our operation, but through our acting with awareness, open to «taking up the challenge and being part of the game» (Casetti 2023: 210): #dancingisnotacrime.

Footnotes

¹ Many newspapers have followed the story: The Guardian [<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jul/08/iran-woman-arrested-instagram-video-dancing>] and Aljazeera [<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/7/9/iran-instagram-and-the-case-of-dancing-teen-macdeh-hojabri>] are an example (04.08.2024).

² Today the Instagram account @__mahimaedeh reached 727,000 followers [<https://www.instagram.com/mahimaedeh/>] (04.08.2024).

³ Cfr: <https://www.instagram.com/explore/tags/dancingisnotacrime/top/> (04.08.2024).

⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁵ Another element of Manning's story of high media impact is his statement, made the day after his conviction, that he wanted to go through a gender transition.

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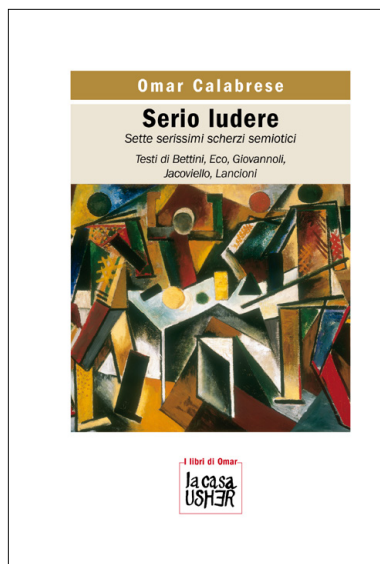
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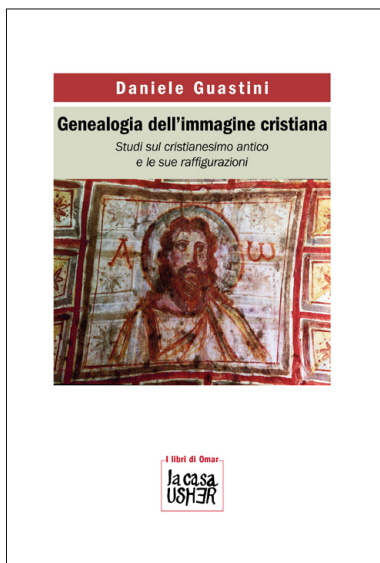
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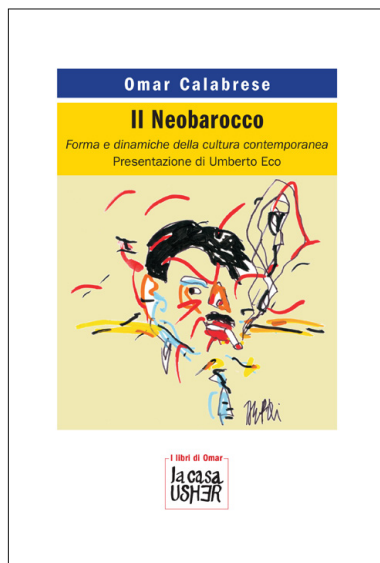
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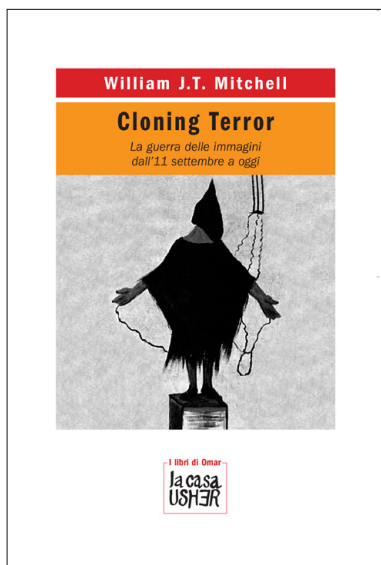
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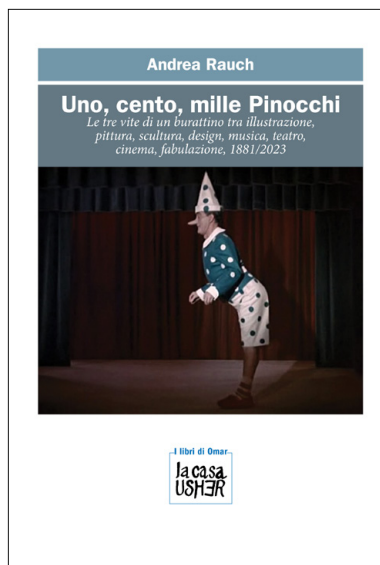
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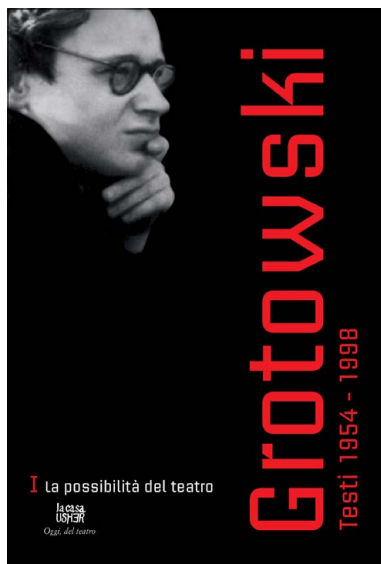
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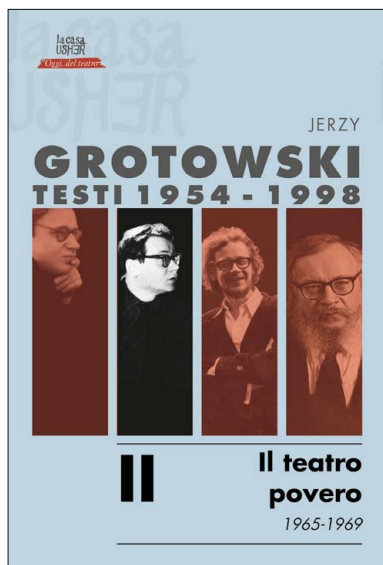


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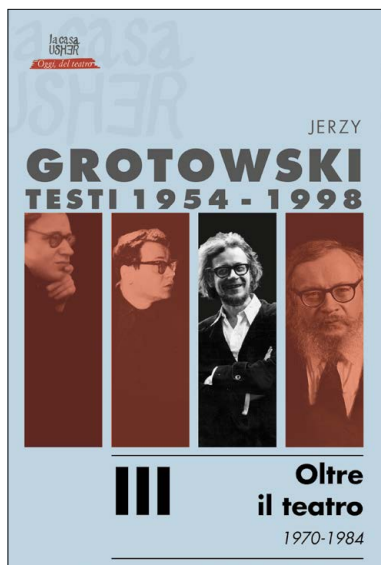


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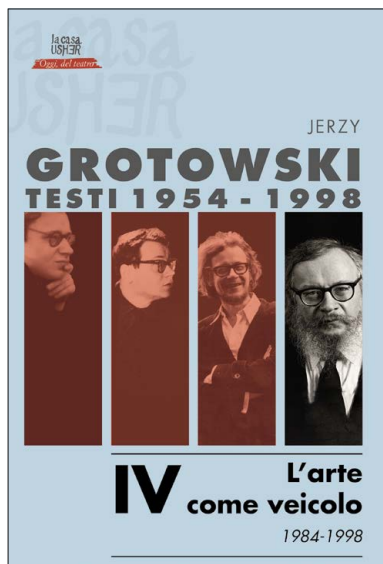
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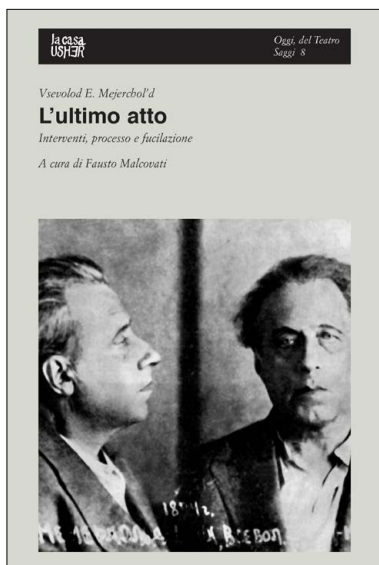


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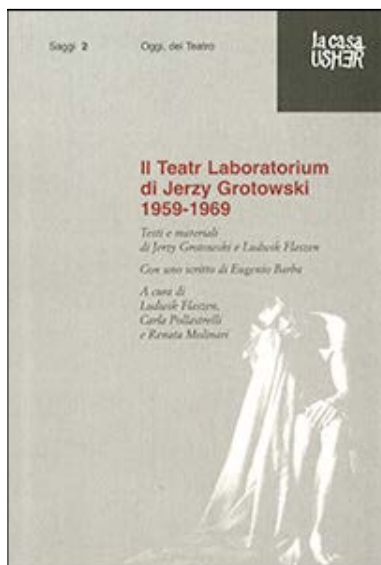


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