Virtu-Real Space:

INFORMATION TECHNOLOGIES AND THE POLITICS OF CONSCIOUSNESS

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A significant shift is occurring in the make-up, physical nature, and composition of space as it is experienced in contemporary culture. This shift, which is a direct result of the ubiquitous presence of information technologies in the cultural landscape, signals that physical components alone no longer comprise the infrastructure of the contemporary social environment. The ads, which show American Express cards in locations where they function as architectural elements (i.e., a bridge support, a path on a golf course, a canopy over a restaurant dining area, and others), indicate that it is now a combination of physical components and virtual systems that support and sustain the "real" world. Virtual credit space, symbolized in the advertisements by the credit card, functions not only as structural support for the physical world, but also as solid footing and shelter for the people who live in that world. And since virtual credit space is operationalized by information technologies, it becomes clear in these commercials that the extent to which physical space has been infiltrated by information technologies is both extreme (the cards are pervasive) and covert (no one in the ads notices the cards). Furthermore, because the cards blend into their surroundings unnoticed, these corporate images also indicate that information technologies are our natural setting. It becomes clear, then, that the use of the credit card icon in these commercials represents the extent to which information technologies have become naturalized as an intrinsic part of contemporary social life.

When viewed in the context of VISA's advertising slogan, "It's everywhere you want to be," the American Express commercials also indicate that information technologies are ubiquitous: virtual space is under our feet, over our heads, and even part of our infrastructure. This ubiquity signifies not only that virtual space is everywhere we want to be, as VISA would have it. It also signifies that virtual space is everywhere we are. And because the credit cards connote debt, these advertisements serve as perfect representations of the concrete reality that contemporary culture is permeated by an overwhelming sense of unpaid credit balances. In fact, the placement of American Express credit cards in various spaces of the contemporary landscape suggests that our culture is founded on debt. This pervasiveness is not a novel notion—the presence of the enormous and growing National Debt is a well-known fact of life, and one needs only read tables from census bureau reports to realize that personal debt continues to rise.[1] But it is a novel notion for this situation to be a prominent, if unacknowledged, sales pitch for a corporation that attempts to sell more debt. Ultimately, this advertising campaign failed, and one of the reasons that was often cited for its failure was that the ads were exceedingly "cold."[2] Perhaps, however, the ads were too true-to-life: their suggestion of being trapped by debt created an all-too-real sense of debt fear in consumers. The foreboding debt subtext of these advertisements, which in many ways perfectly reflected the apocalyptic sense of vertigo experienced upon realizing that credit payments are not able to be met, apparently proved too painful for target audiences to confront.[3]

A second consequence of the ubiquity of virtual space, however, engenders repercussions that are more disturbing than the relatively harmless failure of an advertising campaign. Due to the ubiquity of virtual profiles—which are constantly updated with data about weight, library borrowings, driving record, income level, medical problems, video preferences, and numerous other bits of information—we exist everywhere. Our virtual bodies populate the contemporary virtual landscape. Consequently, our personal information is available to almost anyone who can access virtual space.[4] The scandal over Robert Bork's video rental record during his confirmation hearings demonstrated the relative ease with which this information can now be obtained. But we do not simply exist in virtual space. We are also constructed in that space. Mark Poster characterizes this situation in his book, The Mode of Information, as one in which "... individuals are constituted through their place in the circuit of information flows."[5] Although the concept of a place is antithetical to the placelessness of virtual space, Poster correctly indicates that one of the principal sites of identity construction in contemporary culture is cyberspace.

However, cyberspace is not the only site in which identity is currently constituted. There still must be a physical body that shapes itself in real space before there can be a virtual body. As such, identity remains, to a certain extent, grounded in physicality. But it is the way in which the physical body invents itself in real space that allows it to be virtually constructed. The use of a credit card provides an example. Each use of a card is first an inward construction of identity through a purchase—to paraphrase Barbara Kruger, "I purchase, therefore I am."[6] But the use of a credit card also enables virtual space to outwardly constitute the consumer's identity in terms of demographic information. One result of this situation is that individuals now exist as multiple entities. Consequently, the concept of a stable, Cartesian identity has been replaced by a highly unstable, dispersed identity. The fact that this identity is partially constituted by agents that exist in virtual space leads Poster to write that "Staying tuned in is the chief political act."[7]

The surveillance connotations of the phrase 'staying tuned in' are clear. There are crucial differ-

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ences, however, between the virtual space method of surveillance and the real space method, which is most often represented by the panopticon. Surveillance via the panopticon in prisons is functional only when inmates can be visually located in 3D space by a controller. As Foucault writes, "[T]he major effect of the panopticon. . . [is] to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power."[8] Also, "The panopticon is a machine for dissociating the see/being seen dyad: in the peripheric ring, one is totally seen, without ever seeing; in the central tower, one sees everything without ever being seen."[9] It is clear that the strict boundaries of power that are created by this situation are established and enforced via vision. In virtual space, however, the distinction between surveillant and surveilled is unclear because both the subject and the object are invisible. When this is combined with the fact that every virtual entity is also multiple and dispersed, it is clear that virtual power sites are scattered rather than bi-polar. An additional difference between virtual- and real-space surveillance is that the omnipresence of information technologies insures that virtual behavior monitoring transcribes almost all social interactions by everyone—not only inmates—into data. Ultimately, it is this omnipresence that enables surveillance in virtual space to be a predictive device that operates before actions are performed, rather than a preventative device like the panopticon that functions after actions are performed.

The Identity Economy

And it is this predictive quality that has created what I call the identity economy. In this economy, almost every social transaction—every use of a credit card, every telephone call, every withdrawal of money from a bank account, every mail order, every magazine subscription, every visit to a doctor, etc., —creates a potential surplus of demographic identity information. To again use the example of a credit card, a purchase on credit can yield the following information about the card holder: cost of item purchased, location of purchase, remaining credit balance, etc. Additionally, when cross-referenced with other files, the purchase can also delineate spending patterns. All of this information is in high demand by demographers. Consequently, in order to satisfy the demand for this information, each social transaction is immediately translated into a supply of data that corresponds to the demand. The result of this process is equilibrium, a term used in economics to describe situations in which the market is stable because supply equals demand. In this state of balance, the intersection point of the supply and demand curves indicates a point of "perfect" information.

The business economy places primary importance on this perfect point, and it is only at this point that the future of the business economy is secured.[10] Because it is only when there is perfect consumer information that the practice of predicting future spending habits is able to provide a correct economic forecast. This principle is perhaps most clearly illustrated by the credit card industry's practice of predicting the future spending patterns of cardholders based on previous card usage. It is clear that outdated, "imperfect" information would destabilize this practice and, by extension the business and identity economies. It is also clear that without the universal availability of consumer profiles, current information about consumer habits would be extremely difficult to obtain. Thus, it is now an economic necessity that virtual bodies exist in the information network.

It is important, however, to investigate the racial makeup of these virtual bodies. Due to the fact that large proportions of racial minorities are economically unable to obtain credit cards, and because of the low percentages of racial minorities in college and university programs where consumers often obtain their first credit cards, it is clear that virtual credit space is dominated by virtual white bodies.[11] This renders tactics used by the business and identity economies incapable of even acknowledging the presence of racial minorities in any way that approaches sufficiency, much less of attempting to predict their future spending patterns. But this situation also helps to explain, in part, the tremendous amount of effort that is expended on recruiting racial minorities for higher education; because without a pool of consumers on which to base its decisions, it is very difficult for the business economy to predict its own future. In this sense, education and consumerism go hand-in-hand, and to have a diploma is to be fully functional in the current form of consumer capitalism. Consequently, it becomes obvious that the virtual space of credit cannot be anything but a sphere of mostly white tastes. The inadequacy of the credit apparatus to register large groups of racial minorities, combined with the existence of racial prejudices, creates a situation in which racial minorities continue to be marginalized in contemporary North American culture.[12] One can only hope that Donna Haraway's "ironic dream of a common language for women in the integrated circuit,"[13] can also be a belief that in the future, the circuit will also integrate racial difference. At the moment, the common language is still symbolically and politically binary, resulting in a highly segregated circuit.

The ideas above indicate that it is no longer possible to speak only of real (physical) space; nor is it the case that virtual space has colonized real space (the contemporary landscape is not, and never will be, total virtual reality). Rather, the two categories of virtual and real space have collapsed into one another, creating a virtu-real space that on the surface seems like real space but is significantly different, especially in terms of the social relations that it produces.

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It is the idea of habits, and being caught in virtual space because of them, that is perhaps the most resonant theme in my work. Because habits—those unconscious, private patterns of repeated actions—comprise not only the times when we are most vulnerable; they also comprise those times that are most highly codified in virtual space. Some examples of the codification of habits include: yearly visits to a doctor for a physical examination, which create a comprehensive virtual portrait of health; daily attendance at an educational institution which, when cross-referenced with library borrowing records, constructs a virtual picture of intellectual and political interests;[14] and weekly uses of a credit card to purchase, for example, gasoline, producing not only a credit profile but also a virtual travel record. The fact that all of these actions are routine—yearly, daily, weekly—and banal—involving a routine physical, library books, and gas—renders them almost unperceived by the individual. But there is an inverse relationship between the extent to which these actions are registered by the individual, and the extent to which they are registered by the identity economy. Thus, the self-investigation of habits has become a political act.

In order to sufficiently deal with the issue of habits, and to address the ways in which those habits are monitored, I feel that it is important to confront virtual space on its own terms. Consequently, my work employs techniques and technologies associated with the postal and telephone systems, com-

puter technologies, and the television/video apparatus, all of which are well-integrated into the circuits of the identity economy. By utilizing the same cultural technologies as the identity economy, I think it is possible to gain a clearer sense of the ways in which that economy functions, including how it affects a real body. The following examples are, then, my initial steps into the realm of political consciousness in virtual-real space.

Have Your (Post)Cards Read!

Have Your (Post)Cards Read!, which was first shown at The New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York, was modeled on credit card displays that are often seen in department store customer service centers. These displays are of particular importance to the identity economy because, after the customer obtains a credit card, the store is provided with a direct link, via mail, to that customer. Consequently, the postal system functions as a major, often overlooked, player in the functioning of both the business and the identity economy. The link via mail provides the store with a real-space address where consumer desires are most obviously and profitably materialized in the form of durable good purchases. But the link also allows the customer's habits to be codified by the store, thereby directing demographic target mailings. Each use of the credit card allows the store to obtain information about items that it believes are, and will continue to be, in demand by the customer. This information is then used by the store to target specific customers based on the data that is culled from their purchase records; a practice that subsequently determines which kinds of catalogs are sent to certain customers. The purchase of a power drill on store credit, for example, is an indication that the customer will again be interested in purchasing additional power tools. Accordingly, the customer will receive tool-oriented catalogs in the future. Of particular interest for my project, however, were the loopholes in this system that cause the system to malfunction. One hypothetical malfunction would be for a man to purchase a maternity dress for a female friend who is pregnant. Normally, this man would begin to receive maternity catalogs through the mail because the store would construct him as a pregnant mother. In addition to working with this obviously humorous situation, I was also very interested in opening up an oppositional space within the identity economy that would somehow interrupt the process of target marketing.

The piece consisted of two identical displays that were placed in the museum. Each display requested that visitors to the exhibition fill out a postcard-sized narrative survey, place a stamp on the card, and deposit it in a vitrine that was located in the entrance to the mall. Each display also indicated that the card would be returned to the customer showing the reader's approximation of that which the customer should not purchase—which is the exact opposite of a real department store's intention. The card requested the customer to:

"Please use this space to provide the reader with every piece of information about yourself that you want taken into consideration when your reading is done. Describe your allergies, favorite foods/places/activities, phobias, desires, sexual habits, life goals, inclinations, pet peeves, or any other characteristic(s) that you feel are important for the reader to know. Be as specific (or broad) as you want. This information will not be released to any other party—it's between you and the reader."

The reader, who was me, responded to the customers individually by reading the cards and marking them with a red rubber stamp that read, "DO NOT PURCHASE ." and filling in the blank. The cards were then deposited in the mail, and the customers received their readings a month or so after the exhibition closed.

By requesting personal information in a narrative form (rather than a normal multiple-choice questionnaire that surveys income level, education level, appliances owned, etc.), the customer was encouraged to reveal a more detailed, comprehensive account of his/her personality. In this way, the readings were able to go beyond simple categorizations by responding directly to the complex individuality that exists behind most demographic information. The process of reading the cards also made it clear that statistical constructions of data, which are the result of marketing surveys, are often as misrepresentational as target marketing is faulty.[15]

Double Bind: Virtual Applause

In contrast to Have Your (Post)Cards Read!, Double Bind: Virtual Applause was about my own habits rather than those of anonymous customers. It was also an attempt to address the ways that the categories of consumer and criminal are collapsing into one another. One of the most prevalent methods of information processing that contributes to this collapse is the construction of a consumer record through the use of a credit card. As I continued to think about virtual space, it became clear to me that each use of a credit card generates a particular expression of personal enjoyment, which I call virtual applause. This applause is immediately codified by the credit card industry in terms of a profile that can include detailed information about the consumer and the purchase. Under these conditions, the consumer acquires a record that is based on personal enjoyment. And this record allows the consumer to be monitored. Hence, the double bind of virtual applause.

This double bind was evoked most strongly by the manila folders on the right wall, each of which was a self-constructed profile of one transaction that I have performed with my VISA card since I first became a member in 1986. I profiled every transaction in terms of the information that VISA provided on my statements, as well as my recollection of how I felt about the purchase. Additionally, I included information about how the transaction affected my body, since it is my virtual body that is marked by the transaction in virtual space. Each profile consisted of four broad sections: institutional information, statement information, transaction details, and effects. A sample effect for one transaction, the purchase of concert tickets, read as follows: "Subject subsequently experienced pleasure in and around the ear area, along with a certain amount of pleasure in seeing a 'famous' artist." On the left side of each folder was an acetate overlay of a diagram used by law enforcement agencies to locate scars and marks on the body of a criminal. Under this overlay was a full-length image of my body. The judgment of each transaction was listed as applause in every folder. As with the previous piece, Double Bind: Virtual Applause was meant in part to be humorous, but below the humorous facade I was also interested in presenting a sense of disquiet about the growing similarity that consumer monitoring shares with criminal monitoring.

Another type of double bind was generated in the piece by a cordless telephone receiver that was placed on the left wall. The voice that spoke from the speaker was my own. The telephone itself was not operative, but the telephone's speaker was connected to a looped cassette tape player that played continuously (the player was not visible). The tape consisted of a series of requests that I asked myself to respond to such as, "Please provide information about your weight," "Please provide information about your sex," "Please provide information about your habits," and so on, all of which were read from

a law enforcement manual for constructing profiles of suspects. I answered each request as completely as possible, and each request-and-answer pairing was a message that I previously left for myself on my personal answering machine. The process of making this tape, and the incorporation of the telephone into Double Bind: Virtual Applause, represented an attempt to address not only the fact that virtual identity construction is prevalent throughout the telephone network. It was also an attempt to interrupt the process of objectification that is inherent in that construction process.

Both the manila folders and the telephone receiver/tape focused attention on the metaphor of a target. In the folders, a formal target was created by the lines that crossed over the full-length image of my body, as well as over my body part. Additionally, the folders were, in many ways, concerned with demographic target marketing. The telephone speaker also created a sense of targeting, primarily because of the fact that law enforcement models were used in an attempt to construct my own profile. These metaphorical appropriations made use of the fact that targets often serve the purpose of tracking and codifying the movements of a suspect through space. To a large degree, demographics is primarily concerned with determining the geographic area in which the consumer lives and the places the consumer has visited in order to pre-determine the consumer's future movements through space. Consequently, the prognostications of demographers contribute, in part, to the practice of actually moving bodies through space. This illustrates one of the ways in which a bureaucratic state keeps track of its citizens, as theorized by Deleuze and Guattari who write, "[The State] requires that movement, even the fastest, cease to be the absolute state of a moving body . . . to become the relative characteristic of a 'moved body' going from one point to another . . . In this sense, the State never ceases to decompose, recompose, and transform movement . . . "[16] Given this analysis, it becomes clear that bureaucratic consumer culture is a situation in which virtually every movement is targeted is one way or another.

Pelting

This idea was foregrounded in another piece, a performance/installation titled Pelting. In addition to again being concerned with habits, or habitual actions, this piece in many ways represented my attempt to negotiate with the existence of my targeted virtual body. For the performance, I was locked into a vault in an abandoned fur coat storage warehouse. For the two-hour duration of the piece, I performed various military-based actions, and periodically shot an unloaded gun directly at the camera that was taping me. The camera fed live video images of me to a monitor that was located outside the vault, and as I performed the actions, visitors could see the image of my body on the monitor, but I could not. In this way, the piece confirmed the inability of even attempting to make a mark on a virtual body, symbolically representing the relative lack of control that we have over the information that comprises our virtual profiles. The piece also confirmed, however, that in order to stay tuned in to oneself in a virtu-real landscape, one must become auto-surveillant.

RANT[17]

In summary, the three works that I have described above collapse private habits into public domains. Whether it is my reading of a customer's private ruminations on a postcard, or the publicization of my credit history and consumer desires, or the demarcation of virtual and real space, all of these examples confuse public and private habits, mirroring the way information technologies blur the line that separates private from public information. Historically, the public/private line has been drawn on the walls of the domestic space, a space where the Law of the Father has reigned supreme. The politics of this situation are manifest in the expression, "A man's home is his castle," a structure that is complete with mote and fortified concrete walls, suggesting the extent to which domestic space has long been protected by the Law. But a system like virtual space, which has no physical walls, fundamentally challenges—even dissolves—this boundary, along with the authority of the Father. Private information can now be obtained by using information technologies to penetrate even the walls of the bedroom to obtain data, for instance, about who rents sex videos and how often. The Law of the Father is highly challenged in this situation (recall the earlier statement pertaining to Robert Bork). Under these circumstances, questions about what constitutes privacy in virtu-real space become foregrounded. And as advancements in information technologies continue to facilitate and enhance personal information monitoring, questions of privacy have achieved a sense of urgency. The issue of privacy is doubly urgent because of the recently-inaugurated White House plan to construct an information superhighway. The economic potential of this plan has not escaped the agendas of corporate interests. But the issue of privacy has been conspicuously absent from such agendas, indicating that the financial economy continues to overlook the identity economy. As such, debates about virtu-real privacy must attempt to reveal the hidden agendas that exist behind the facade of "progress" via information technology development. Correspondingly, attention must also be paid to the extent to which individuals will be able to stay tuned in to their own bodies—virtual, real, or virtu-real. At the moment, even the boundary of the skin does not separate private from public, because almost every mark that is made on the physical body by a medical professional creates a corresponding data mark on the virtual body.

Faced as we are with the (purported) impending takeover of real space by virtual space (largely by pundits of virtual reality), it is of crucial importance to reveal their hidden agendas. It is also crucial to stay tuned in to the ways in which physical matter is manipulated. With this paper I hope to have revealed some of the agendas that I see being hidden in current debates about information technologies; and I also hope to have shown how I attempt to stay tuned in to my real body. Because, as Allucquere Rosanne Stone writes, "No refigured virtual body, no matter how beautiful, will slow the death of a cyberpunk with AIDS."[18]

Notes

1. Consumer credit outstanding in 1970 was $131.6 billion. In 1989, it was $778.0 billion. The ratios of this debt to disposable personal income were 18.3 and 20.6, respectively. Data taken from 1990 Census Bureau Reports, p. 510.
2. See, for example, the article, "'The Card' Ads Lose in Survey," in The New York Times, July 16, 1992, sec. D, p. 17, col. 3.
3. It is interesting to note that these advertisements were replaced by more user-friendly ads featuring, for example, comedian Jerry Seinfeld cavorting with a goldfish.
4. The recent emergence of Information American (an on-line database with an estimated 111 million profiles) and the growing use of computer networks is significantly contributing to this situation.
5. Poster, Mark. The Mode of Information: Poststructuralism and Social Context. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1990, p. 136.
6. It is often maintained that no purchase in contemporary culture can be an inner-directed action because corporate adver-

tisements construct all consumer desire. But this method of analysis attributes no agency or cognitive ability to the individual and, in the end, is the product of a simplistic, insufficient, and exceedingly totalizing analysis of the world.

7. Poster, p. 136.
8. Foucault, Michel. Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison. Translated by Sheridan, Alan. New York: Vintage Books, 1979, p. 201. Italics added.
9. Foucault, p. 201-202.
10. The business economy is not the only entity that uses the identity economy. But in this analysis, corporate culture relies on the identity economy to a larger extent than, for example, the library profession.
11. The relative presence of racial minorities in virtual crime space, however, is sure to be much higher than that of whites.
12. It should be noted that marketers do, in fact, notice the cultural productions of racial minorities, especially in musical cases like rap and hip-hop. But it must also be realized that one of the most profitable rap music ventures is still that of Vanilla Ice.
13. Haraway, Donna J. Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature. New York: Routledge, 1991, p. 149. Italics added.
14. The importance of monitoring intellectuals, especially "suspicious" intellectuals, because of their library-borrowing record was revealed in the FBI's Library Awareness Program. For an analysis of this surveillance program, see Foerstel, Herbert N. Surveillance in the Stacks: The FBI's Library Awareness Program. Contributions in Political Science, Number 266. New York: Greenwood Press, 1991.
15. This project will be continued in other venues in order to try to invent a way of conducting demographic analysis that does not replicate the corporate model. The piece will be shown again this spring at the Zimmerli Art Museum on the Rutgers University campus. Also, Capp Street Project in San Francisco and the Center on Contemporary Art in Seattle have expressed an interest in presenting it.
16. Deleuze, Felix and Guattari, Félix. A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia. Translated by Massumi, Brian. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987, p. 386.
17. A form of expression often cited as appropriate to the information age. For examples of rants, see: Rucker, Rudy; Sirius, R.U.; and Mu, Queen. MONDO 2000: A User's Guide to the New Edge. New York: Harper Collins Publishers, Inc., 1992, pp. 210-220, 312.
18. Stone, Allucquere Rosanne. "Will the Real Body Please Stand Up?: Boundary Stories about Virtual Cultures," in Cyberspace: First Steps. Edited by Benedikt, Michael. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1991, p. 113.

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