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In the Shadow of the Cell-Phone

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ABSTRACT

Based on discussions of hybrid space as well as the concepts of the database and archive art, the paper analyzes Hasan Elahi's project "Tracking Transience" (2003-) and relates it to Sophie Calle's performance "Detective" (1980) while discussing how we can understand the mobile phone as a device that is capable of creating a 'database shadow' of the mobile phone owner. Elahi created "Tracking Transience" after he was held back by the FBI in 2003 on suspicion of being a possible terrorist; by consulting the website trackingtransience.net everyone now has access to the data generated by Elahi and his mobile phone, which meticulously tracks his life. However, even though Elahi's life seems to be thoroughly and intimately documented with pictures of e.g. every eaten meal and every visited restroom, we are clearly not getting the full picture. Consequently, despite having been granted access to an enormous amount of data, we are left with a feeling of following a shadow or maybe a mirage. This paper explores how the mobile phone affords this playing hide-and-seek, and the way that it provides shelter from the inspecting eye.

Author Keywords

database art, archive, hybrid space, shadow, mobile phone, Hasan Elahi, Sophie Calle

1. Introduction

"The most transitory of things, a shadow, the proverbial emblem of all that is fleeting and momentary, may be fettered by the spells of our 'natural magic,' and may be fixed for ever in the position which it seemed only destined for a single instant to occupy." [20: 40]

"The developments of the previous decade; the Web platform, the dramatically decreased costs of the consumer electronics devices for media capture and playback [...] led to the explosion of user-generated 'content' [...] the details of everyday life of hundreds of millions of people who make and upload their media [...] became public. What before was ephemeral, transient, unmappable, and invisible become permanent, mappable, and viewable." [18: 8]

In 1980, French artist Sophie Calle asked her mother to hire a private detective to shadow her for a day. Not knowing which day she would be followed, Calle took extensive notes and repeated her actions every day for a week with the dual purpose of investigating her own perception of possibly being shadowed as well as the difference between the detective's and her own perceptions of (a day in) the life of Sophie Calle. The project resulted in the now famous art work "Detective" [5], which consists of her own notes/diary/report, the detective's surveillance report (text and pictures), and pictures of the detective shadowing
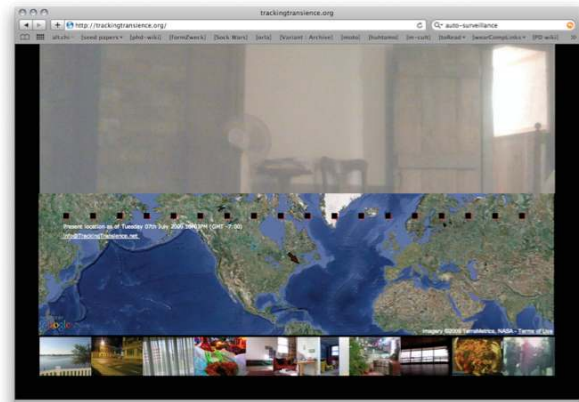

Figure 1: The "Tracking Transience" webpage is divided into three parts: the top part shows the most recent picture uploaded by Elahi. It is revealed through horizontal scroll similar to an automated camera scan. The middle part is a satellite image and 18 black squares that determine zoom level. The words "Present location as of [...]" followed by a timestamp indicate the time he arrived at the current location. The 10 pictures in the bottom part of the webpage are chosen randomly from the database. Clicking any picture activates a pop-up showing one of the ways in which we can 'zoom in' on Elahi's life (see figures 2-5).

Calle taken by a friend of hers hired to follow the follower. The artwork explicitly highlights the discrepancy of Calle's and the detective's interpretation of her actions but it also shows how the detective looses track of her and instead fills in the gaps himself (see also [13] for a thorough analysis).

In 2003, 23 years later, American artist Hasan Elahi 'hired' his mobile phone to continuously follow, document and upload his actions. With this decision, he commenced the art project "Tracking Transience" [9] with the purpose of reclaiming his life from FBI. On suspicion of being a terrorist, mostly due to his extensive traveling, Elahi had secretly been put under surveillance by the FBI and based on data and observations, the bureau concluded that he had to explain himself. After having been taken into custody, questioned for days about his whereabouts, and eventually cleared of suspicion, Elahi decided to de-monopolize FBI's surveillance data and start auto-surveilling himself online. Consequently, by consulting the website trackingtransience.net (see Figure 1) everyone has access to Elahi's current location as well as to a repository of photographic documentation of certain

aspects of his life, which is meticulously tracked with his ever-present mobile phone. Unlike in Calle's "Detective", we only have access to the surveillance 'report' (location data, travel data and a huge collection of pictures) and not to Elahi's own notes and thoughts. On the other hand, this seemingly objective report is comprised of data captured by Elahi himself. However, and this is similar to Calle's experiences with the detective's notes, something is out of tune in "Tracking Transience". This 'out of tune-ness' will be the focus of the present paper.

In many refined ways "Tracking Transience" addresses key themes in the areas of digital aesthetics and software studies such as surveillance, sousveillance (counter-surveillance), the ontology of analog/digital, photographic truth, and the perception of reality. An analysis of the artwork could thus take many directions. However, this paper will leave most of the above themes for another paper to consider, and instead investigate how "Tracking Transience" uses the mobile phone as a tool to create a seemingly accurate digital profile or shadow of Elahi, while at the same time – in the spirit of Calle's "Detective" – clearly demonstrating the in-accuracies of data derived from the act of shadowing. I will argue that on the one hand, Elahi's mobile phone allows for an immediate and seemingly 'neutral' and automated surveillance but on the other hand, it also obstructs the project of an efficient shadowing because of the nature of the mobile and hybrid space it operates in. "Tracking Transience" uses the online (re)presentation or archive of the mobile phone's 'recordings' to critically investigate the 'nature' of hybrid space as well as how digital data makes (or does not make) sense as evidence of lived life. At the end of the paper, I will make use of the metaphor of the shadow because it covers several meanings relevant to "Tracking Transience": as a noun, it denotes a 'copy' of something else in the same way that the shadow of an object is a copy thereof (which also the above quote by Talbot [20], one of the inventors of the photographic process, points towards) but it also denotes a place where one can seek shelter from either the sun or an inspecting gaze. At the same time, the noun 'shadow' also connotes the verb 'to shadow', which is the service provided by a private detective, whose copy-creating capabilities Calle used as aesthetic material in "Detective". Like Calle, also Elahi explores the act of shadowing as aesthetic material, only his source is not a human detective's capabilities but rather the mobile phone's capability to provide digital tracking. However, the digital and automated private detective that shadows Elahi incessantly, provides an efficient shelter as well. Because paradoxically, as also Elahi remarks below, the constant tracking allows him to lead a quite anonymous life as he hides behind the digital shadow that (seemingly) fully discloses his life online:

"While my whole life is out there and everything's public, at the same time by putting everything out there, I become completely anonymous. I mean what basically happens is that you know everything, and yet you know nothing about me simultaneously. That allows me to lead a very private life." [6]

In addition to a more thorough presentation of the "Tracking Transience" website, the following paper will be divided into three parts concerned with the concept of hybrid space; with the (re)presentation in and of (data-)archives, and finally with combining the insights derived from those two parts with the metaphor of the data-generating shadow in order to see how "Tracking Transience" can help us reach a (perhaps conceptual) understanding of what kind of hybrid life the mobile phone affords through its ubiquitous presence.

Figure 2: A pop-up window displaying various meals. Featured picture caption: cape town 5 august.
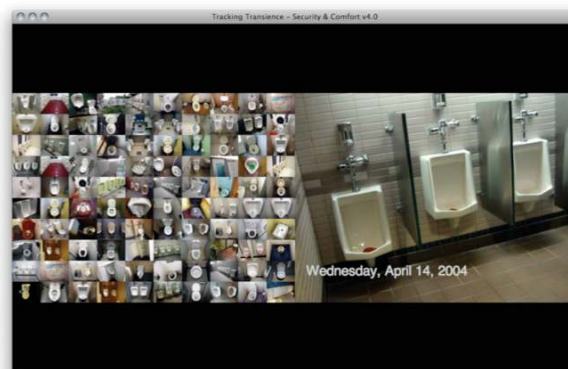

Figure 3: A pop-up window displaying a number of toilets. Featured picture caption: Wednesday, April 14, 2004.

2. Presentation of "Tracking Transience"

The "Tracking Transience" website (see Figure 1) is navigated by clicking the pictures in the bottom menu; all pictures change when one picture is clicked and it seems that the content of the appearing pop-up window is chosen randomly and independently of the picture itself and its position in the menu. Only one pop-up window can be activated at a time although this constraint does not make the task of navigating any easier because the randomly assigned content creates a maze-like infrastructure. As viewers, we are quickly lost in the underlying database, as we neither know how we got a particular result nor how we will get it again. The pop-up windows present pictures of what Elahi eats, the toilets he visits, and the airports he travels through. In some presentations, a picture is annotated with place and time (see Figure 2) whilst other presentations are specific in other ways, revealing either time but not place (see Figure 3), place but not time (see Figure 4), or no data at all (see Figure 5). Furthermore, we also have access to various kinds of lists: credit card statements, flight itineraries, and airport codes for airports he has travelled through.

It is notable how none of the captions are ever completely precise (even though digital photos are automatically time stamped and often also contain precise location data due to built-in GPS). In Figure 2, for instance, the time annotation contains neither year nor time of day; in Figure 3 the exact date is disclosed but not time of day and furthermore the location is missing; and in Figure 4 place is on the one hand very accurate (flight number and plane type) but on the other hand the plane could be anywhere between Tokyo and San Francisco, which makes the place annotation worthless if we want to know the exact location. It is clear that even though we are able to follow Elahi on a constantly updated satellite map and even though some of the information in the photographs is very detailed – we are able to see exactly what Elahi eats, where he relieves his body of the digested food, and where he flies to when he leaves the ground – there is still plenty of information left out, effectively making the viewer's tracking of Elahi difficult.

It seems that the website of "Tracking Transience" 'lures' us viewers into thinking that we get precise information about Elahi's experiences on a very personal (exact location, meals and travel) and intimate (toilets) level, but on a closer look it turns out that we hardly know anything at all. The temporal signs in "Tracking Transience" are highly indexical as they point towards accurate and instant updates and that what we see is happening (t)here and now – time and space appears to be communicated and seen instantaneously (almost rather presented than represented). It seems that no matter where he is, we have access to his life within the shortest possible time frame. However, we are confronted with a perspective on Elahi's life that brings us close to him in a way that also hides him from our sight. Even though we get a lot of information, the value of this information is uncertain: some data types are over-represented whilst others are not represented at all. Like a shadow and in a very subtle way, he is present without actually being there. I will now take a closer look at how this is played out in the artwork by beginning with the technological framework making "Tracking Transience" possible and more importantly, with looking at the kind of space that the art work makes use of: the hybrid and mobile space.

3. The notion of hybrid space

"Hybrid spaces are mobile spaces, created by the constant movement of users who carry portable devices continuously connected to the Internet and to other users." [7: 262] Following Souza e Silva [7], 'hybrid space' denotes a space where boundaries between physical space and virtual space are blurred by help of mobile devices (see also [15]). Souza e Silva continues: "The possibility of an 'always-on' connection when one moves through a city transforms our experience of space by enfolding remote contexts inside the present context." [7: 262] Like in Calle's project, in "Tracking Transience" the remote context is not necessarily actual people, but rather the awareness that other people might potentially see the indexical results of Elahi's photographic actions in his act of auto-surveillance. Which, more importantly, enfolds the present context inside the remote context of the database.

Also Manovich discusses how dataspace and real world locations are connected through mobile technologies by analyzing how in the cellspace paradigm, as he names this age of mobile computing, any physical location is linked to dataspace and thus always has "a particular value on a possible continuum" [17: 224]. Furthermore, this numerical data value is always accessible and computable, because due to mobile devices "every point in

Figure 4: A pop-up window displaying flight meals. Featured picture caption: Northwest Airlines Flight NW28, Boeing 747. Tokyo Narita (NRT) to San Francisco International (SFO). 9 hours & 25 minutes, 5131 miles/8258 km.
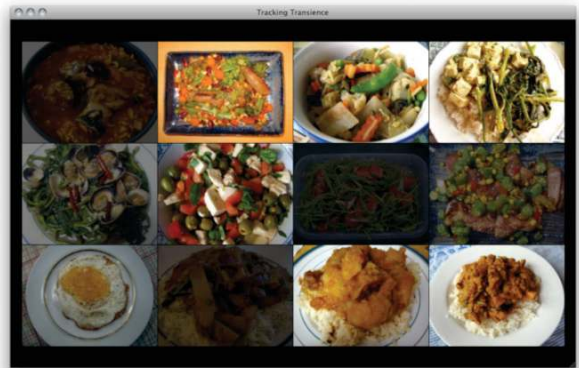

Figure 5: A pop-up window displaying food. No captions. None of the pictures can be highlighted or watched separately.

physical space can be said to contain some information that can be retrieved using a PDA or similar device." [17: 228].

Coupling this dataspace with Manovich's earlier [16] notion of the database and the narrative (essentially created by the algorithm), this means that every point in physical space has also at least one entry in a database. This is directly reflected in "Tracking Transience" in the part of the website where the current location (the physical space) is clearly marked with a red arrow on a satellite map (the database) of the world; the arrow even blinks the same way a cursor blinks when it signifies that the computer is 'alive' and waiting for input. Manovich's conceptual reflections do, however, introduce even wider consequences. He argues that every location is also a computable point in dataspace (at least theoretically, as he adds) but the question is if that makes every computational point equal to a location. Or to argue with "Tracking Transience" in mind: the question is whether the points in the database of "Tracking Transience" equal Elahi's life? Are the mobile phone's experiences (as they are depicted in "Tracking Transience") an objective concentrate of Elahi's life just like the detective following Calle aims to get an understanding of her through his observations and notes about her actions and appearance?

The answer is of course: no. "Tracking Transience" is almost anything but a 'true' and 'trustworthy' representation of Elahi's life even though we have access to lots of details. It is, however, still some kind of evidence of an existence and a lived life, even though we viewers are probably more 'writing' than 'reading' a story (cf. also Barthes' notion of the readerly and the writerly text [1]. This paradox can be explored further through the idea of the archive and the database, which I will expand on shortly.

But to briefly return to Souza e Silva's point above on the enfolding of the present context inside the remote context of the database, this means that the space in which the mobile phone is actually present is connected to the *space of the representation* at any time and any place. This representational space is comprised of the database that holds the automatically generated – and therefore 'objective' – space of the archive. The "Tracking Transience" website is thus in essence an entry point to a massive database of lists and pictures and can be understood as a commentary on how physical space is represented in the digital dataspace: as singular points only connected through virtual references. In that sense, "Tracking Transience" is a critical comment on the nature of hybrid space; as something that does not seamlessly combine the digital and the analogue, but rather connects them through rather fragile references. I will expand on the consequences of this after having had a closer look at the concepts of the database and the digital archive.

4. The database and the (data) archive

Art historian Hal Foster [11] distinguishes between archival art and database art because the latter, in Foster's definition, is about sorting and sampling from continuously growing 'found' databases through machinic processing rather than about archiving fragmentary material through human interpretation. [11: 4-5] This definition places "Tracking Transience" as a hybrid between the two forms: while it is a growing database where material is added and displayed as a result of automated tasks (for instance automatic upload of pictures), thus making it 'fungible' in Foster's sense, these automated tasks happen as a consequence of Elahi's subjective and artistic choices (for instance rules for what to document when, and choosing how to tag a picture of a meal) thus making it an archive based on human interpretations rather than pure machinic reprocessing. While the database is comprised of objects (photographs and location data) that are specifically chosen to (re)present certain 'slices' of Elahi's life, this of course does not mean or guarantee that the 'reader' following Elahi on the "Tracking Transience" website will perceive and interpret the same cause-and-effect patterns. If the database or archive is a digital shadow of Elahi, the user-detective might not be following the right combination of traces. Or to put it metaphorically, it might be a mirage more than a shadow. Let's look at why.

Returning to Manovich's definitions, the database is always present as a potentiality, as something that can be accessed everywhere and at all times. But more importantly, "Tracking Transience" makes clear that it is close to impossible to make meaning out of a database; that it is almost meaningless to attempt to link from the database to the real world. Returning to Manovich's 'dataspace' and 'cellspace' concepts, "Tracking Transience" points out that while every point in real space is also a unique point in dataspace (possibly consisting of several linked objects), every point in dataspace is not necessarily only one point in real space. The pictures of flight dinners can serve as an example of this: When Elahi documents a specific meal on the

flight from Tokyo to San Francisco (see Figure 4), the representation of the meal becomes an entry in the database. Reversing the logic, however, from database to physical world, this particular meal can be associated with any number of flights. Elahi makes this aspect clear by way of the caption, which neither contains a date nor something that can tell us exactly where the plane was when the picture was shot. In this way, the points in real space to which the point in dataspace can be associated, are almost infinite. So while Elahi (or anyone else for that matter) may be able to generate data out of a meal on the plane, data cannot necessarily be *applied* meaningfully to the physical location on which it originated.

This relationship between the producer and the receiver, or the recording and the viewing, is similar to how art historian Mette Sandbye describes what is at stake in Calle's followed/follower projects. According to Sandbye, Calle investigates "the relation between the photograph and its viewer; she investigates the desire to see more, well knowing that it is a desire that will never be fulfilled" [19: 173] But what do we viewers see, if we don't see 'more'? One possibility is that we see what we want to see. That in the case of the digital archive, the database compresses the information to such an extent (cf. [2]) that there is plenty of room for constructive interpretation very much in the spirit of Iser's "Leerstellen" ('blanks') [14]. The consequences of course being, as Foucault states below, that the (hi)story is written by the interpreter and not the generator of the archive or the database: "The document [...] is no longer for history an inert material through which it tries to reconstitute what men have done or said, the events of which only the traces remains; history is now trying to define within the documentary material itself unities, totalities, series, relations." [12: 7]

Similarly, art critic Enwezor remarks that the archive is generative of a variety of meanings that, however, tend to 'erase' or make invisible the 'original' event. The documenting process itself eventually cuts the cords to its own origin: "But this relationship between past event and its document, an action and its archival photographic trace, is not simply the act of citing a preexisting object or event; the photographic document is a replacement of the object or event, not merely a record of it." [10: 23] The idea of replacing the object or the event is taken even further by Baudrillard, who – in an essay on Calle's famous "Suite Venitienne" where she follows a stranger to and around Venice – writes: "[...] there is something murderous in the situation for the one who is followed [...] It consists of following someone step by step, of *erasing his traces* along the way, and no one can live without traces." [3: 74(original italics)]

Consequently, it seems that even though the database actually reveals very little about the life 'behind' the compressed content (cf. [2]), the database cannot and should not be escaped as also Enwezor remarks with regards to archival art "[...] the artistic event or action [...is...] staged as much for itself as for the camera. Without the photographic or filmic record of events or performances, the condition of reality on which their received effect as works of art depended would not have existed." [10: 22-23].

With this paradox of the documenting of ephemeral actions as something that both 'kills' and 'keeps alive', I have reached the concluding remarks on how the mobile phone's built-in hybrid space is the foundation of Elahi's critical (but not necessarily negative) investigation of the digital data shadow as it reveals itself in "Tracking Transience".

5. Conclusion: In the shadows of a hybrid life

The idea of the 'hybrid life' covers that the life of the person being shadowed in "Tracking Transience" is a hybrid of many (media) layers, as it consists of:

- the actual experiences (or the experiences themselves),

- the mediation of them (through e.g. photographing them or geo-tagging them),

- the thinking of the mediation of them (like Calle's thoughts of her life as seen by someone else),

- the pattern relation to the rest of the entries in the "Tracking Transience" database (e.g. all meals containing meat, all meals consumed on a plane, or all toilets visited).

In this sense, there is no life apart from the hybrid life; the person 'behind' "Tracking Transience" – and this person acts as a stand-in for the rest of us – is always already living a life that consists of all the mediation components. However, even though it is a highly mediated life, the medium does not carry the entire message, which Elahi so clearly states both in interviews and through "Tracking Transience", as I have demonstrated here.

There is an interesting interplay between the (photographic) documentation and the hybrid life of the user (in this case Elahi): On the one hand, the documentation is what 'proves' that there has been a life or an event, but on the other hand, the documentation constantly escapes the lived life and creates its own. As Calle says about the former in her intro to "Detective": "In April 1981, at my request, my mother went to a detective agency. She hired them to follow me, to report on my daily activities, and to provide photographic evidence of my existence." [5: 122]. Baudrillard, on the other hand discusses how her "Suite Venitienne", it too a piece about following, is also about the artificial nature of the follower's documentary results when he states that: "what's important is that *it is the shadowing in itself that is the other's double life.* To shadow another is to give him, in fact, a double life, a parallel existence." [3: 74(original italics)]

Similarly, "Tracking Transience" is as much the 'real life' of Elahi as it is an artificial one. Like Umberto Eco's story of a map that covers the entire ground in a 1:1 ratio ([8], see also the similar idea in [4]), the representation of Elahi's life is easily mistaken for the real thing. This is of course what "Tracking Transience" demonstrates on a concrete level with references to the incident where FBI mistook data for knowledge. But "Tracking Transience" also points towards an alternative understanding of the relation between representation and reality in that the website not only exposes Elahi's life and whereabouts; it also provides shelter. In this case, the combination of the ubiquitously present mobile phone and the always and instantly updated online presence of the database, both serves as an automated detective agency, constantly shadowing Elahi, and as a quite efficient filter that shelters Elahi's own (real) world from the world of the spectator who only has access to the database. In this sense, Elahi's life is being shadowed by "Tracking Transience" but he also stands in the protective shadows of the 'map' or the representation. And it seems that this is an inherent quality or characteristic of the mobile phone's always-on and always-(t)here presence.

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