What is the relationship between contemporary digital media and contemporary society? Is it possible to affirm that digital media are without sin and exist purely in a complex socio-political and economic context within which the users bring with them their ethical and cultural complexities? This issue, through a range of scholarly writings, analyzes the problems of ethics and sin within contemporary digital media frameworks.
Without Sin: Freedom and Taboo in Digital Media

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*Leonardo Electronic Almanac*  
Volume 19 Issue 4
Without Sin: Freedom and Taboo in Digital Media

INTRODUCTION

“Without Sin: Freedom and Taboo in Digital Media” is both the title of this special edition and the title of a panel that was held at ISEA 2011. The goal of the panel was to explore the disinhibited mind’s ability to exercise freedom, act on desires and explore the taboo whilst also surveying the broader question of the moral economy of human activity and how this is translates (or not) within digital media. The original panelists (some of whom have contributed to this edition) helped to further delineate additional issues surrounding identity, ethics, human socialization and the need to better capture/understand/perceive how we are being affected by our technologies (for good or bad).

In the call for participation, I offered the view that contemporary social technologies are continuously changing our practical reality, a reality where human experience and technical artifacts have become both intertwined, but for many interwoven, inseparable – if this were to be true then type of cognizance (legal and personal) do we need to develop? Implied in this call is the need for both a better awareness and jurisdiction of these emergent issues. Whilst this edition is not (and could not be) a unified survey of human activity and digital media; the final edition contains 17 multidisciplinary papers spanning Law, Curation, Pedagogy, Choreography, Art History, Political Science, Creative Practice and Critical Theory – the volume attempts to illustrate the complexity of the situation and if possible the kinship between pertinent disciplines.

Human relationships are rich and they’re messy and they’re demanding. And we clean them up with technology. Texting, email, posting, all of these things let us present the self, as we want to be. We get to edit, and that means we get to delete, and that means we get to retouch, the face, the voice, the flesh, the body – not too little, not too much, just right. Sherry Turkle’s current hypothesis is that technology has introduced mechanisms that bypass traditional concepts of both community and identity indeed that we are facing (and some of us are struggling with) an array of reconceptualizations.

Zygmunt Bauman in his essay “From Pilgrim to Tourist – or a Short History of Identity” suggests that:

One thinks of identity whenever one is not sure if where one belongs; that is, one is not sure how to place oneself among the evident variety if behavioral styles and patterns, and how to make sure that people would accept this placement as right and proper, so that both sides would know how to go on in each other’s presence. ‘Identity’ is the name given to the escape sought from that uncertainty.

Our ‘post-social’ context where increased communication, travel and migration bought about by technology – the volume attempts to illustrate the complexity of the situation and if possible the kinship between pertinent disciplines.

What Social Contract?

Hereby it is manifest that during the time men live without a common power to keep them all in awe, they are in that condition which is called war; and such a war as is of every man against every man. (Thomas Hobbes in chapter XIII of the Leviathan)

Deborah Swack’s “FEELTRACE and the Emotions (after Charles Darwin),” Johnny Golding’s “Ana-Materialism & The Pinéal Eye: Becoming Mouth-Breast” and Kris Ravett’s “Anonymous Social As Political” argue that our perception of political authority is somewhere between shakily towards becoming erased altogether. Whilst the original 17th century rational for submitting to a political authority – i.e. we’d default back to a war like state in the absence of a binding social contract – seems like a overwrought fear, the capacity for repugnant anti-social behavior as a consequence of no longer being in awe of any common power is real and increasingly impactful. Proportionally the notion of a government that has been created by individuals to protect themselves from one another sadly seems hopelessly incongruent in today’s increasingly skeptical context. Co-joined to the dissipation of perceptible political entities – the power dynamics of being ‘good’ rather than ‘bad’ and or ‘sinful’ appears to be one of the most defining of our prior social borders. The new reality that allows us to transgress and explore our tastes and predictions from a remote and often depersonalized position feels safer (i.e. with less personal accountability) a scenario that is a further exacerbated space vacated by the historic role of the church as a civic authority. Mikhail Pushkin in his paper “Do we need morality anymore?” explores the online moral value system and how this ties into the deleterious effect of the sensationalism in traditional mass media. He suggests that the absence of restrictive online social structure means the very consciousness of sin and guilt has now changed and potentially so has our capability of experiencing the emotions tied to guilt.

Sandra Wilson and Lilia Gomez in their paper “The Premeditation of Identity Management in Art & Design – New Model Cyborgs – Organic & Digital” concur stating that “the line dividing taboos from desires is often blurred, and a taboo can quickly flip into a desire, if the conditions under which that interaction take place change.”

The Free?

The issue of freedom seems to be where much of the debate continues – between what constitutes false liberty and real freedoms. Unique in their own approach Golding’s and Pushkin’s papers challenge the premise that is implied in this edition’s title – that ‘Freedom and Taboo’ even have a place at all in our contemporary existence as our established codes of morality (and ethics) have been radically reconfigured.

This stance made me recall Hobbes’s first treaty where he argued that “commodious living” (i.e. morality, politics, society), are purely conventional and that moral terms are not objective states of affairs but are reflections of tastes and preferences – indeed within another of his key concepts (i.e. the “State of Nature”) ‘anything goes’ as nothing is immoral and or unjust. It would ‘appear’ that we are freer from traditional institutional controls whilst at the same time one could argue that the borders of contiguous social forms (i.e. institutional controls whilst at the same time one could argue that the borders of contiguous social forms (i.e. institutional controls whilst at the same time one could argue that the borders of contiguous social forms (i.e.
procedures, networks, our relationship to objects and things) seem to have dissipated alongside our capacity to perceive them. The problematic lack of an established conventional commensurable living such as Bau-
man’s idea that something is ‘right and proper’ is under challenge by the individualized complexity thrown up from our dishabited minds, which can result in benign or toxic or ‘other’ behaviors depending on our person-
ality’s variables. Ravetto describes how Anonymous consciously inhabits such an ‘other’ space:

Anonymous demonstrates how the common cannot take on an ethical or coherent political message. It can only produce a heterogeneity of spontaneous actions, contradictory messages, and embrace its contradictions, its act of vigilante jus-
tice as much as its dark, racist, sexist, homophobic and predatory qualities.

Perception
Traditionally good cognition of identity/society/rela-
tionships (networks and procedures) was achieved through a mix of social conditioning and astute mind-
fulness. On the other hand at present the dissipation of contiguous social forms has problematized the whole process creating multiple social situations (new and prior) and rather than a semi-stable situation (to reflect upon) we are faced with a digital deluge of unverifiable information. Perception and memory comes up in David R. Burns’s paper “Media, Memory, and Representation in the Digital Age: Rebirth” where he looks at the problematic role of digital mediation in his personal experience of the 9/11. He recalls the discommodulating feeling of being: “part of the digi-
tal media being internationally broadcast across the world.” Burns seeks to highlight the media’s influence over an individual’s constructed memories. From a different perspective Charlie Gere reminds us of the different perspective Charlie Gere reminds us of the over an individual’s constructed memories. From a
variety of unverifiable information. Perception and memory
consciously inhabits such an ‘other’ space:

I don’t believe society understands what happens
when everything is available, knowable and recorded by everyone all the time.” Smita Kheria’s “Copyright and Digital Art practice: The ‘Schizophrenic’ Position of the Digital Artist” and Alana Kushner’s “When Curat-
ing Meets Piracy: Rehashing the History of Unauthor-
ised Exhibition-Making” explore accountability and power relationships in different loci whilst looking at the mitigation of creative appropriation and reuse. It is clear that in this area serious reconfigurations have oc-
curred and that new paradigms of acceptability (often counter to the legal reality) are at play.

Burns’s belief that “One thinks of identity whenever one is not sure if where one belongs” may be a clue into why social media have become such an integral part of modern society. It is after all an activity that privileges ‘looking’ and objectifying without the recipi-
cent’s direct engagement – a new power relationship quite displaced from traditional (identity affirming) social interactions. In this context of social media over dependency it may be timely to reconsider Guy-Ernest Debord’s thesis 30:

The externality of the spectacle in relation to the active man appears in the fact that his own ges-
tures are no longer his but those of another who represents them to him. This is why the spectator feels at home nowhere, because the spectacle is everywhere.

Underneath these issues of perception / presence / identity / is a change or at least a blurring in our politi-

cal (and personal) agency. Don Ritte’s paper “Content Osmosis and the Political Economy of Social Media” functions as a reminder of the historical precedents and continued subterfuges that occur in mediated feelings of empowerment. Whilst Brigit Bachler in her paper “Like Reality” presents to the reader that “besides reality television formats, social networking sites such as Facebook have successfully delivered a new form of watching each other, in a seemingly safe setting, on a screen at home” and that “the appeal of the real becomes the promise of access to the reality of manipulation.” The notion of better access to the ‘untruth’ of things also appears in Ravetto’s paper “Anonymous: Social as Political” where she argues that “secrecy and openness are in fact aopris.” What is unclear is that, as society maintains its voyeuristic bent and the spectacle is being conflated into the ba-
nality of social media, are we becoming occluded from meaningful developmental human interactions? If so, we are to re-create a sense of agency in a process challenged (or already transformed) by clever implicit back-end data gathering and an unknown/unde-
clared use our data’s mined ‘self.’ Then, and only then, dissociative anonymity may become one strategy that allows us to be more independent; to be willed enough to see the world from our own distinctive needs whilst devising our own extensions to the long genealogy of moral concepts.

Somewhere / Someplace
Perpetual evolution and sustained emergence is one of the other interconnecting threads found within the edition. Many of the authors recognize a requirement for fluidity as a reaction to the pace of change. Geog-
raper David Harvey uses the term “space-time compo-

tion” to refer to “processes that…revolutionize the objective qualities of space and time.” Indeed there seems to be consensus in the edition that we are in “an accelerated existence and a concomitant dissolution of traditional spatial co-ordinates” – Swack cites Joanna Zylinska’s “human being” to a perpetual “human becoming.” whilst Golding in her paper reminds us that Hobbes also asserted that “[f]or see-
ing life is but a motion of Limbs” and that motion, comes from motion and is inextricably linked to the develop-
ment and right of the individual. But Golding expands this changing of state further and argues where repetition (and loop) exist so does a different experience:
The usual culprits of time and space (or time as distinct from space and vice versa), along with identity, meaning. Existenz. Being, reconfigure via a relational morphogenesis of velocity, mass, and intensity. This is an immanent surface cohesion, the compelling into a ‘this’ or a ‘here’ or a ‘now;’ a space-time terrain, a collapse and rearticulation of the tick-tick-ticking of distance, movement, speed, born through the repetitive but relative enfolding of otherness, symmetry and diversion.

Golding’s is a bewildering proposition requiring a frame of mind traditionally fostered by theoretical physicists but one that may aptly summarize the nature of the quandary. The authors contributing to this edition all exist in their own ways in a post-digital environment, anthropologist Lucy Suchman describes this environment as being “the view from nowhere, detached intimacy, and located accountability.” Wilson and Gomez further offer a possible coping strategy by exploring the usefulness of Jay Bolter and Richard Grusin’s “pre-mediation” as a means to externalize a host of fears and reduce negative emotions in the face of uncertainty. The imperative to create some strategies to make sense of some of these pressing issues is something that I explore in my own contribution in which I offer the new term Precarious Design – as a category of contemporary practice that is emerging from the design community. Precarious Design encompasses a set of practices that by expressing current and near future scenarios are well positioned to probe deeper and tease out important underlying societal assumptions to attain understanding or control in our context of sustained cultural and technological change.

Embody

In theory our deterritorialized and changed relationship with our materiality provides a new context in which a disinhibited mind could better act on desires and explore the taboo. Ken Hollings’s paper “THERE MUST BE SOMETHING WRONG WITH THIS, SALLY... Faults, lapses and imperfections in the sex life of machines” – presents a compelling survey of the early origin of when humans began to objectify and try live through our machines starting with disembodiment of voice as self that arose from the recording of sound via the Edison phonograph in 1876. Golding and Swack mull over the implications of the digital on embodiment and what it means now to be ‘human’ as we veer away from biological truth and associated moral values towards something else. Sue Hawksley’s “Dancing on the Head of a Sin: touch, dance and taboo” reminds us of our sensorial basis in which:

Touch is generally the least shared, or acknowledged, and the most taboo of the senses. Haptic and touch-screen technologies are becoming ubiquitous, but although this makes touch more commonly experienced or shared, it is often reframed through the virtual, while inter-personal touch still tends to remain sexualized, militarized or medicalized (in most Western cultures at least).

Within her paper Hawksley provides an argument (and example) on how the mediation of one taboo – dance – through another – touch – could mitigate the perceived moral dangers and usual frames of social responsibility. Swack raises bioethical questions about the future nature of life for humans and “the embodiment and containment of the self and its symbiotic integration and enhancement with technology and machines.” Whilst Wilson and Gomez go on to discuss Bioprescence by Shiho Fukuhara and Georg Tremmel – a project that provocatively “creates Human DNA trees by transcoding the essence of a human being within the DNA of a tree in order to create ‘Living Memorials’ or ‘Transgenic Tombstones’” as an example of a manifest situation that still yields a (rare) feeling of transgression into the taboo.

CONCLUSION

In the interstices of this edition there are some questions/observations that remain somewhat unanswered and others that are nascent in their formation. They are listed below as a last comment and as a gateway to further considerations.

Does freedom from traditional hierarchy equate to empowerment when structures and social boundaries are also massively variable and dispersed and are pervasive to the point of incomprehension/invalidation? Or is there some salve to be found in Foucault’s line that “Power is everywhere” and ‘comes from everywhere’ so in this sense is neither an agency nor a structure. Thus nothing is actually being ‘lost’ in our current context? And is it possible that power has always resided within the individual and we only need to readjust to this autonomy?

Conventional political power (and their panoptic strategies) seem to be stalling, as efforts to resist and subvert deep-seated and long-held governmental secrecy over military/intelligence activities have gained increased momentum while their once privileged data joins in the leaky soft membrane that is the ethics of sharing digitally stored information.

Through dissociative strategies like online anonymity comes power re-balance, potentially giving the individual a better recourse to contest unjust actions/laws but what happens when we have no meaningful social contract to direct our civility? Its seems pertinent to explore if we may be in need of a new social contract that reconnects or reconfigures the idea of accountability – indeed it was interesting to see the contrast between Suchman’s observed ‘lack of accountability’ and the Anonymous collective agenda of holding (often political or corporate) hypocrites ‘accountable’ through punitive measures such as Denial-of-Service attacks.

Regarding de-contextualization of the image / identity – there seems to be something worth bracing oneself against in the free-fall of taxonomies, how we see, how we relate, how we perceive, how we understand that even the surface of things has changed and could still be changing. There is no longer a floating signifier but potentially an abandoned sign in a cloud of dissipating (or endlessly shifting) signification. Where once:

The judges of normality are present everywhere.
We are in the society of the teacher-judge, the doctor-judge, the educator-judge, the ‘social-worker’-judge; it is on them that the universal reign of the normative is based; and each individual, wherever he may find himself, subjects to it his body, his gestures, his behaviour, his aptitudes, his achievements."

There now is no culturally specific norm in the diffuse digital-physical continuum, which makes the materiality and durability of truth very tenuous indeed; a scenario that judges-teaches-social workers are having some difficulty in addressing and responding to in a timely manner, an activity that the theoretically speculative and methodologically informed research as contained within this edition can hopefully help them with.

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REFERENCES AND NOTES


4. Thomas Hobbes, Leviathan (Charleston, South Carolina: Forgotten Books, 1976), Ch. XIII.


6. As perhaps Friedrich Nietzsche would argue... He has previously described “orgies of feelings” that are directly linked to our capacity to feel in and guilt. “To wrench the human soul from its moorings, to immerse it in terrors, ice, flames, and raptures to such an extent that it is liberated from all petty displeasure, gloom, and depression as by a flash of lightning” Friedrich Nietzsche, The Genealogy of Morals, trans. Horace Samuel (New York: Russell and Russell, 1964), 139.


8. Consequential subsets within a disinhibited mind are dis-sociative anonymity (you don’t know me) and dis-sociative imagination (Its just a game), which can lead to benign actions such as random acts of kindness or being more affectionate or potentially toxic (exploring more violent assertive sides of ones nature) and ‘other’ behaviors.


15. “The alienation of the spectator to the profit of the contemplative object (which is the result of his own unconscious activity) is expressed in the following way: the more he contemplates the less he lives; the more he accepts recognizing himself in the dominant images of need, the less he understands his own existence and his own desires. The externality of the spectacle in relation to the active consciousness (its just a game), which can lead to benign actions such as random acts of kindness or being more affectionate or potentially toxic (exploring more violent assertive sides of ones nature) and ‘other’ behaviors.


18. Mirko Schäfer highlights the role of implicit participation in the success of the Web 2.0. a situation where user activities are implemental unknowingly in interfaces and back-end design.


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