Panel After Memory: Other Networks and Speculative Forms of Connection

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Abstract

This panel aims to discuss how the notion of networks could be reimagined after the Internet's 'lost decade' (Lovinik, 2022) and the end of a fantasy that Web 2.0 would be a democratic and emancipatory environment (Crary, 2022). Starting from a debate about how memory is affected by image overdose, endless social media feeds and clouded storage spaces, we focus on different forms of communication, an essential aspect of the conception and actualisation of memory. As such, it will be discussed how artists and activists have been imagining or developing alternative forms of networks, bringing together both projects with an immediate social goal and artworks that have already proposed speculative forms of communication from the mid–1990's to the present time.

Keywords

memory politics, maintenance, data sovereignty, digital media, communication, communities.

Introduction

Essentially, all memory only exists *a posteriori*. Only what has already passed, can be recalled; only what has already been forgotten can be remembered. But how to determine in the present time what will have had to be known for the future? Especially as the present extends endlessly, the contemporary moment proceeds uninterruptedly, and the perception of time is obliterated. Submerged, as we are, in this perpetual now and its excessive images and imaginaries, how can we elaborate our memories? How can we remember a past or imagine possible futures beyond the confines of our present time? What remains, many times, are only remains: a fragmented memory that is constituted at the exact moment as something happens; an ephemeral memory that continuously emerges and vanishes untethered from posterity.

If temporal fragmentation is far from a new thing, and one can relate this phenomenon with the essence of the development of capitalism since its early stages, it is hard to deny that the internet complex has exacerbated this feeling exponentially. [1] While our recent past is remembered as thematic galleries assembled by automated digital systems whose rules we are unaware of, what happens in the present remains indecipherable and imperceptible. And especially under the circumstances imposed by the Covid-19 pandemic, when the immersive experience of screens became the default perception in this even more 24/7 overexposed new reality, this effect was even stronger.

This period has also reinforced the surveillance to which we seem increasingly hostage. The notion of data colonialism devised by Nick Couldry and Ulises A. Mejias summarises well the unprecedented scale of surveillance, in which "human beings become not just actors in the production process but raw material that can be transformed into value for the production process." [2] Facial recognition systems have gained a greater ground—a market that is expected to grow from 3,2 billion dollars to 7 billion in 2024. [3] Since the Cambridge Analytica scandal revelations in 2018, which led 9.6 percent of people to delete their Facebook accounts, the discussion around the controversial dynamics of social media has reached a greater number of people. [4] The naturalisation of these tools and the difficulty of keeping up with all this during the pandemic reinforced a desire to withdraw from it all.

The disappearance of "any form of sociability that goes beyond mere individual interest" is pointed out by Jonathan Crary as one of the effects of 24/7 capitalism. [5] Although previous devices such as the TV have already had a great impact in creating an experience of diffuse attention, the author argues that our "ghostly digital isolation" was certainly aggravated by the ubiquitous contemporary devices that we are constantly immersed in. And especially under the circumstances imposed by the Covid-19 pandemic, this effect is even stronger.

In *Extinction Internet: Our Inconvenient Truth Moment* (2022), Geert Lovink states that we have reached the end of "an era of possibilities and speculation", and the idea of adaptation can no longer be considered in the current context. [6] But what is the emergency exit for this scenario in which the platforms seem to have closed any possibility of collective imagination, but without surrendering to the "romanticism of the offline?" Lovink also does not present answers, but makes it clear that the

end is indisputable and necessary for a new path to be imagined and reinvented.

Starting from this debate, we aim to discuss in this panel how some artists and activists from the mid–1990s to the present days have been imagining or putting in practice alternative forms of networks, finding other ways to communicate and form communities—a central aspect in creating and updating memories. As such, we will present few projects with a clear and immediate social impact as well as artistic artworks that propose speculative forms of communication—in some cases, having eventually developed the tools to make it happen.

Teleporting An Unknown State (1994/96) by the artist Eduardo Kac, is the first case study. Using remote transmission of video images for their optical phenomenon as wavefronts of light, this "biotelematic interactive installation", as he defined, enables biological life to grow in a different place through the light particles teletransported. Participants around the world become responsible for the survival of a plant located inside a dark gallery, sending light from the sky from their different locations via the internet via a cell phone so that the plant can make photosynthesis. This artwork opens up questions surrounding a sense of community that arises between individuals around the world, as well as the internet as an ecosystem in which everyone is responsible for the information disseminated.

Denilson Baniwa and Gustavo Caboco, part of a movement called Contemporary Indigenous Art in Brazil, created the term 'network pedagogy' to define a collaborative work process that involves multiple agents. In Portuguese, the word 'network' has the same meaning as the 'hammocks', an object of Amerindian origin that was strongly incorporated into Brazilian culture in domestic places. These etymological similarities highlight parallels between the ways of life of indigenous societies and the original principle of communication networks as a means of forming communities—at least, in the more idealistic view of the early days of the internet. In his latest book *Futuro Ancestral* [Ancestral Future], the writer and indigenous activist Ailton Krenak devised the idea of 'affective alliances', which 'presupposes affections between different worlds' and from which 'it is possible to be only one person within a flow capable of producing affections and meanings'. [7] This thought resonates with contemporary art projects devised by Baniwa and Caboco applying the 'network pedagogy' principles, and some of which will be discussed in this panel.

The affective dimension of memory is also essential to Heba Y. Amin's artistic research Project *Speak2Tweet* (2011-ongoing). On 27 January 2011, Egyptian authorities shut down the country's international Internet access points to quash the growing protests and mobilization online. To circumvent the blackout, programmers developed Speak2Tweet, a digital platform that allowed Egyptians to record voice messages by calling specific telephone numbers that would be automatically posted to Twitter. The platform went viral within hours, so that Speak2Tweet published seventy spoken tweets per minute and, through a global effort of volunteers, translated and transcribed these messages into several languages. Rather than to mobilize

people on the ground, as many of them were already out protesting, the platform was used to relay emotional sentiments and personal stories to the outside world. Composed of thousands of such audio recordings, this digital platform produced a unique archive of the collective Egyptian psyche during a time of unprecedented upheaval.

As an artist and researcher, Heba Y. Amin has been entrusted with this archive of voice messages after Speak2Tweet was taken down. Amin preserved the audio recordings and related them with film footage documenting abandoned infrastructures and failed architectural projects around Cairo that she had been shooting ten years prior to the uprising. This juxtaposition pairs the deserted sites of political corruption with the plurality of personal voices united in revolutionary spirit at the demise of the same system. Project *Speak2Tweet* reclaims agency over writing the history of the revolution against attempts to erase it from educational curricula and public commemoration by the Egyptian government and furnishes the revolutionary narratives with a plurality of intimate perspectives embedded with affective information. As such, it engages critically with the democratic promise of the online networks and constitutes an offline space for shared remembrance. In doing so, Heba Y. Amin's artistic research project counteracts digital amnesia as it safeguards the emotional residue of a silenced past and enacts a sense of digital immortality as it enables us to listen to voices of dissent haunting the ruins of authoritarian states and networked capitalism.

Navigating the internet, we approach the surface of projects, but they need a complex system to assure this interface: from updates and software dependencies to servers that need electricity to continue to work, and people working to avoid that the system is down. There are two approaches to maintenance: the *platformization* or software as a service, in which users (in exchange for money or their data) interact with a programme or upload their data into servers without any control over the software or the infrastructure that is just made invisible (*it just works!*). [8] The ones in charge of the platform have the power over the data they host, and this dependency can be dramatic and drive to data loss. After a closer look, we discover that the maintenance is subcontracted with diverse forms of precariousness, often reflecting colonial policies and extreme resources' consumption of the data centres. [9] Jara Rocha, a researcher in the project *InfraMaintenance*, develops the idea of *Life as a Service (LaaS)* trying to understand how this model is affecting our lives while mapping some alternatives at the same time: communities that understand maintenance of their digital structure as a way of caring. The infrastructure they build is handcrafted and may be fragile, their enormous effort on documenting and making visible and accessible this work allows them to develop alliances with other collectives to assure the continuity and sovereignty of their projects. [10]

Reflecting on how we access our present moment through digital means raises significant questions about historical consciousness and, perhaps more specifically, about how we collectively access the events of history. There is no doubt that networked communication and the digitization of information reconfigure our individual and

shared memories; but, despite the web's predisposition to remember everything, we cannot actually rely on the mere presence of data to preserve histories or to nurture a sense of social cohesion and coherence. Instead, the future of public memories is determined by, on the one hand, algorithms that have very different incentives about what content to surface and, on the other, corporate and governmental actors who have a vested interest in owning or fabricating certain narratives.

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Nathalia Lavigne [she/her]
She works as a researcher, independent curator and writer. Post-doctoral fellow at MAC USP, she has a PhD from FAUUSP and a master's degree in Critical Theory and Cultural Studies from Birkbeck, University of London. During her doctorate, she carried out research internships at The New School, in New York, and at Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, awarded CAPES-PDSE and DAAD scholarships, respectively. His research interests involve topics such as digital archives, circulation of images on social networks and new museum narratives created in distributed intelligence processes. She has texts published in magazines and newspapers such as Artforum, ArtReview, Contemporary &, ZUM and Folha de São Paulo. As a curator, she has held exhibitions such as "Against, Again: Art Under Attack in Brazil" (2020), at Anya and Andrew Shiva Gallery (John Jay College, CUNY), in New York; "Tactics of Disappearance" (2021), at Paço das Artes, and several projects in galleries and art

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Lisa Deml [she/her]
She is an independent curator, writer, and researcher. Initially trained as a journalist, she subsequently worked for public institutions and non-profit organisations, including Haus der Kulturen der Welt [HKW], Berlin; Haus der Kunst, Munich; and Ashkal Alwan, Beirut. Her texts have been featured in exhibition catalogues, such as Rabih Mroué: Interviews [ed. Nadim Samman, KW Institute for Contemporary Art / Hatje Cantz, 2022] as well as in journals, including Third Text, PARSE, and Critical Arts. She recently concluded her Midlands4Cities funded doctoral research project at Birmingham City University that sought to develop an ethics of spectatorship through artistic and documentary practices in Syria since 2011 and their circulation in the global news economy and culture industry.

Víctor Fancelli Capdevila [he/him]
He works as a digital archivist at the Open Resource Centre (ORC). Originally, he worked in the field of website development and maintenance before gaining work experience at the university archive of the Karlsruhe Institut für Technologie (KIT) and the ZKM | Zentrum für Kunst und Medien Karlsruhe. He completed a master's degree in media philosophy and art history and has since dedicated his research to the (political) relationships between people, technology, education, and shared memory. This is reflected in his contributions to various conferences on archiving and teaching as well as in digital literacy workshops for NGOs as part of the EU3Digital project. He is part of the organisational team of Sobtec Congrés Sobirania Tecnologica, Barcelona.