

A discussion between Anne Barlow and Jenny Marketou, New York, December 14, 2001

AB: How would you define your own artistic position in terms of the 'varying feminist strategies, innovations and critiques' outlined in the introduction to *Cyberfem Spirit: Spirit of Data*?

JM: It is not really about gender. As a female artist confronting the ability to act politically, I assume that it is necessary to act simultaneously on various levels, and with different systems, to create cooperative working forms that offer room for difference. This is the challenge for me: how to extend and empower myself by engaging diverse communities in both virtual and real spaces that have a transformative impact on the cultural production of our society.

AB: Can you tell me more about the four components of *taystes.net* as a surveillance web tool?

JM: By logging on, you automatically make your presence visible on-line. Attempting perhaps to lurk beneath the veil of your online persona, you unknowingly become part of the database—part of the 'viewed'. Normally we think of web grabbers and data visualization as functional tools. In *taystes.net*, I have tried to make them functional and dysfunctional at the same time. The "grabber" component is programmed like a web "flaneur", crawling through the internet, gathering, processing, and distributing packs of information data, such as streams from surveillance cameras, webcams and chat rooms. The "chatterbox" allows the user to make anonymous textual interventions into chat rooms, whilst the "tayster" is a good example of how a dynamically generated application by developers offers access to the database as a medium. The database generates a continuous flow of new abstract forms each time it processes information gathered through surveillance cameras and webcams. Finally under the "histories", users can track previous users' activity—in terms of where, when, and what they have seen—whilst simultaneously leaving their own traces.

AB: You envisage *taystes.net* as a tool for participation rather than interaction. How do you define the fundamental difference between these, and what are the advantages (for both the viewer and the artist) of a participatory approach?

JM: The decision to become a provider of an open source "tool" came exactly from my interest in exploring the difference between interaction and "open"

participation. A “tool” allows the user, rather than an artist or programmer, to be the author of project content. This is a big difference. taystes.net is designed as a ‘tool’ that will be dynamically generated over time, taking into account information behaviors and applications employed by the use of data and by input from other artists, musicians, and users. It will therefore function as a collective artifact created by a community of developers. The benefit of this “tool” is that users can discover the beauty of the process, rather than seeing it simply as a means to an end. taystes.net is an extension of my work in that it will revise the nature of the relationship with the user/audience/community.

AB: You describe the installation “Taystesroom” as the ‘interface’ between

taystes.net and viewers. Can you describe how you worked with architect Andreas Angelidakis and artist Ile Cvetkoski to create the physical and sonic aspects of the space? What did these aspects add—or perhaps even detract from—the initial internet-based concept for the work?

JM: The installation “Taystesroom” was created for the Broken Channel exhibition (Cornerhouse Gallery and Futuresonic Festival, Manchester, UK, November, 2001). The sonic component of “Taystesroom” was created in collaboration with Macedonian DJ/musician Ile Cvetkoski, to whom I was introduced during the Root festival at Hull Time Based Arts. Ile is a good example of a “developer”, and I gave him access to the code and database of taystes.net. And as the name “taystes” suggests, Ile built in a sonic plug that extracts and surveys a tasty sampling of the smorgasbord of ongoing network activity on the database of surveillance streams from local and remote users and back to the server. It is a generative and dynamic sound visualization that the visitor not only encounters in taystesroom—but generates when she /he interfaces with the taystes.net tool.

Certainly the sonic element has expanded the experience and the participation of user in terms of real and virtual content. It also adds an erotic sensuality to the rather formal architecture of taystesroom.

My collaboration with architect Andreas Angelidakis came as the result of a long friendship and mutual interest in each other’s work. The final architectural design for Taystesroom was achieved as a result of intense discussions. It was most important for Andreas to understand the open source system architecture of Taystes (as a generative data visualization tool), as well as my desire to expand this experience into the real space of the gallery. He created a voyeuristic arena that drew on the principles of intimacy, as well as on the erotic nature of a hub/room. This architecture functioned as a platform for a collective action and community.

AB: This work continues your long-standing interest in surveillance, as seen in earlier projects such as smellbytes.org. In what ways is taystes.net pushing the nature of Internet discourse and production in relation to the subject of surveillance?

JM: I would like to start with a quote, “The Internet has arrived at the position where eyes can see how eyes see “ Christine Buci-Glucksmann (The Madness of Seeing). As with smellbytes.org, my goal in taystes.net is to look at how technologies developed for surveillance and control such as CCTV, biometrics and the Internet can be used in the pursuit of radical or disruptive visions. My work explores the disembodied aesthetics and forbidden sounds of individuals—reduced to specters flickering across monitor screens—or the erotic fantasies of control that observational technologies prize open. Certainly taystes.net speaks of the disembodied nature of our real and simulated virtual realities. It also comments upon the schism between reality and fantasy, and real-time interaction versus a cycling loop of playback imagery—where ‘time now’ and ‘time past’ are seamlessly fused into one apparently endless data loop. At the same, I want to call into question our notions of communications privacy, and with it, our ability to navigate throughout the networks anonymously, and freely. taystes.net raises issues of identity and authentication, especially in relation to biometrics (the system of identity recognition and authentication based upon unique physiological characteristics such as face or voice recognition).

A good example of this is the component under “histories”. All your actions are made transparent. Although you (the viewer) may have entered the space of the project as if into the control room (hoping to electronically eavesdrop, to lurk, to monitor, and to detect), in the end, perhaps you are the subject. You are the one being viewed, transmitting and being recorded—leaving your own traces, ‘electronic fingerprints’, and IP addresses.

AB: taystes.net allows viewers to circumvent existing infrastructures such as webcams, chat rooms, and surveillance mechanisms. Although taystes.net is based on open source philosophy and format, I wondered if any new or unexpected kinds of ‘power structures’ could be created among viewers?

JM: In a time where the question of software and power comes into play, the user can ask why then does taystes.net operates not on the LINUX system but in WINDOWS, where the software giant Microsoft refuses to make publicly available, the source code? Well, if software is power, then power to the people, by operating on the Windows platform, taystes.net calls into question the notion that this perhaps should and must become a world of open source architectures,

where interaction and dialogue are key. The WWW, one of the most popular of internet protocols, can be seen in taystes.net as a two-way medium, a network topology of connectivity and social interaction. I do not think, however, that the Internet is the right platform on which to create community-based hierarchies. This would contradict the Internet as a non-hierarchical, but constantly flowing and shifting medium.

AB: You mention your plans for downloading the chat input of the viewer, so that this text is archived as language data. Can you tell me more about how this will change the site?

JM: As with the other components, the language data can be gathered, processed and distributed by the future “developers “ in combination with other data and/or it can be treated as a figurative image from a collection of shapes, colors, lines, sounds and compositions. But the chat itself can be treated as a textual non-linear narrative that is dynamically generated. Again, taystes.net is open to aesthetic possibilities and the resulting meanings and the formal effects are endless.

AB: You state that ‘observational technologies can be prized open to reveal erotic fantasies of control’. How do viewers access and contribute to these fantasies, and to what degree can the body itself be observed or revealed?

JM: A common trope during the rise of anatomical dissection during the 16th century was the Latin saying "Know Thyself" (literally, inside and out). The fascination with public anatomy theaters was this doubled auto-voyeurism: during a public dissection, you were seeing what your insides looked like, but at the same time it obviously wasn't you down there, splayed open, on the dissection table. I believe the phenomena we experience now with the ‘Big Brother’ on television programs and the presence of web cams and surveillance cameras on the net, going public is quite similar. These surveillance cameras are everywhere, a daily reality, invisible or visible, always monitoring everyday life in anticipation of the crime to happen. These banal, smeared images are images of our time, and in this age of high resolution they have the feeling of a vague memory. It seems to me that webcams are based on the surveillance model of panopticon—sinister and empty of narrative—exploring the topography of each targeted subject whom, through exhibitionist acts and permanent on-line presence grapples with new technology mediated through the Internet. I noticed that the erotic tension of watching, and being watched, creates an increasingly technological and networked surveillance around the voyeur—who is free to speculate but always hopeless because he/she wants to see more.

AB: What kind of 'satisfaction' do you expect viewers to have, depending on their skill level?

JM: We gain something from 'in-between-ness' or trajectory, but even more from becoming accustomed to the zone of unfamiliar processes. There is no question that this kind of approach requires some computer skills from the user in order to explore the full potential of the "tool". On the other hand, taystes.net is designed to engage the average Internet user by giving immediate access to the database and taking into account familiar, everyday behavior such as email, web browser, navigation, and input. In this way, it demystifies the power and control of the surveillance and tracking system on the net. I have noticed in the previous places where taystes.net has been exhibited—such as CTRL(Space) ZKM, Broken Channels, Cornerhouse Gallery and now at Edith Russ House—that it attracts all kinds of users. I would like to add that making art, whether on or off line is a human function. Art needs to rehabilitate in a way that reasserts the human and the human ability to act upon information and meaning and I can not help feeling that part of this involves techniques, effort, time and thought.

Anne Barlow is responsible for several new media programs at the New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York. She was formerly contemporary art curator for various institutions in the United Kingdom, where she initiated a range of exhibitions, commissions, artists' residencies, and new media projects. She has also participated on numerous art juries, and contributed to catalogues and journals in the U.S. and abroad.