

INSIDE OUT: PRELIMINARY SKETCH FOR A PUBLIC ART PROJECT

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1. ORIGINS

A man, 36 years old, lives in the 4th floor of a nice apartment building. The place is a very clean mess. The man never seems to go out, and wakes up late every day. He thinks a lot and drinks a lot of coffee. His favorite object is his bed, and secondly he likes the window to the street. He has a perfect view to a busy corner. He looks at the crowds that swarm and gather there and recreates their lives with his imagination, judging them as if he was beyond them. He collects their gestures and uses them as information to violate their intimacy. He thinks he knows what they are all about. He renders their busy lives meaningless by creating layers of language between them and his window. For him they are colorful moving shapes populating the screen. People are his ideas, living only after they have been noticed by him.

Unexpectedly, one day he recognizes one of them that looks exactly like him, even wearing the same garments. His alias nervously rushes to the corner of the street, and looks around confused, trying to find something in the distance. The man upstairs can't make sense out of what he's witnessing through his window. His double seems to stop looking and just freezes there, surrounded by all the busy people who don't even notice him, his eyes locked in front of his face. The man upstairs gets nervous, and it takes him a few seconds to react. He runs down to the street, abandoning his tower of abstraction for the first time in a long time. He runs down as quickly as he can, yet when he gets to the corner there is no one there, except for the usual crowd he doesn't care about. The meaningless little people from the window. And he is one of them now. Desperate, he looks around trying to find his double walking away, but he fails. Then he understands: a few minutes ago he was looking at himself, trying to find out where his double was.

I wrote this short story in 2004 when living in New York city. It is inspired after countless evenings spent chatting in my father's apartment in Mexico City, where that corner and window are a reality. I used a collection of stories like this one to try to understand alienation in the city. When I look back at this work I also find elements of surveillance in this kind of intellectual voyeurism, that takes advantage of a space labeled as public to use vision and memory as a sort of predatory device to hunt and possess. This particular story turns the observer inside out by turning him into the observed, creating a loop by mirroring interior and exterior.

My goal for the public art project is to force you to look at yourself in others by finding ways to reverse roles in surveillance and the techno-mediated spectacle. This kind of spectacle and surveillance are opposite extremes of the same media immersed loop. Surveillance violates the space by recording human activity without being noticed, and the spectacle does it by broadcasting other kinds of human activity without being solicited. They are inherently disjoint. I am thinking what can happen if they can somehow get connected, if there is a way to make the

television feel like the screens by the counter in the seven-eleven, or the bubble covered cameras in the parking lot and the ATM feel like an opportunity to be on the media spotlight.

A potential scenario can be the opening of a space for expression that otherwise would be typically occupied by propaganda or advertisement. For example, a kind of billboard that could broadcast messages (text, images, video or a combination of all) that could be made by people using a content creation website, or combined, between people using a content creation website and material coming from cameras located in strategic places. The use of cameras raises a few problems. Do you just capture video of people and project it on a big billboard on top of a building next to them? What will be the reaction of people waiting for the bus when they see a blown up projection of themselves on top of the building across the street? Will that create an awareness against surveillance, or a defensive reaction against the art? Is it ethical to do something like this? On a less invasive scenario cameras could be located next to a sign in a populated transit or waiting area, inviting bystanders to project themselves onto the cityscape by standing next to the camera or pressing a button.

However, the scenario I just described does not realize the particular loop I am interested in exploring, where people could be caught looking at themselves when they were looking at others. A more direct scenario can be found by setting up a kind of public surveillance video system. Security rooms usually have computerized systems that monitor over a network of cameras, and display the input from all of them on a grid onscreen. Interactive resources allow users to browse through the different views and zoom into any of them to explore details, potentially helping build a feeling of empowerment on the user, that gains atop-down perspective over the rest of his world. By taking one of these systems and opening it to the public, so that any bystander walking by could explore a larger area of their environment can arouse their creativity and inspire their voyeuristic feelings. What reaction will somebody have if he could eventually find a camera that is looking at him, after having spent some time following other people with the rest of the cameras?

