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May 15, 2013

Dada/Surrealism

Final Paper

<div align="center">Sur-Realizing the Internet</div>

In some ways, reading a text such as Matthew Gale's "Dada & Surrealism" is like holding a mirror up to the present age. Considering the organization, pace, and platform of new media, 21st century life appears to be a manifestation and maximum achievement of Surrealist principles and Dada tendencies.

"SURREALISM, n. Pure psychic automatism, by which it is intended to express, either verbally, or in writing, or in any other way, the true functioning of thought"

From this definition—André Breton's own definition—we can observe new media's trajectory into early 20th century ideals. In what follows, I will trace specific aspects of new media's relationship to Surrealism, and I will ruminate on the directions new media art can take to advance the Dada agenda.

I: Us Watching the Machine/The Machine Watching Us

Surrealism, as it stands etymologically, pushes a concept of uncovering/discovering what's "'above' or 'beyond' realism" (Gale, 216). André Breton had been describing work this way for years before writing the Surrealist Manifesto in 1924, and Surrealism as a movement was dead roughly around 1947. But a close examination of new media and the Internet's role in present society is not even necessary to discover we are still uncovering

sur-realism. Conceptually, our current technologies and tendencies mirror the broad gestures of Surrealism: from automatism to revised attempts to tap the subconscious, from free association games to self-publication. Etymologically, the link is as explicit as the word "Surrealism" itself: today we have an augmented reality.

Augmented reality (AR) technologies are a product of new media culture. In Stefan Livia's words for Applied Mathematics,

> "It [augmented reality] is a process of mediated reality by means of human senses and behaviour, through computer sensors and devices, in real time and in a synchronous manner." (par. 2)

In other words, augmented reality is a catch-all term for any set of technologies which are designed to enhance or affect the user's sense of the present reality. These technologies bring the user to a higher reality, one where certain things are possible when they otherwise would not be. The camera, for instance, is a common building block for augmented reality. Connecting a camera-enabled device with AR software can transform a landscape into an infographic.

Layar is such an application, developed for smartphones. When the application is booted up, the user is first asked what they are looking for. When the user sets a parameter, they are shown a realtime viewfinder through the camera lens. On top of the live feed, Layar draws maps, arrows, labels, and icons for information relevant to the user's parameter. For example, if a user tells Layar they are looking for pizza, Layar will show the user pizza places in the camera's line-of-sight on top of the camera's feed. Pizza places that are farther away from the user's geo-position (as recorded tacitly by the phone's

satellite connection) are shown smaller to mimic perspective. As the user rotates about, looking through the phone, Layar's maps move with them. Turning to the left reveals pizza places that were off-screen before. Of course, tapping any one of Layar's augmentations will bring up more relevant information that is opaque from everyday instantaneous knowledge (i.e. what you would know just by looking at something): address, hours of operation, directions, customer reviews, etc. Literally, Layar as an augmented reality application *layers* additional realities *on top* of the perceived reality. All of the additions are truthful representations what is simply not immediately available to the viewer.

This layering on top of a live camera feed is important considering Surrealism's similar practice editing what the camera sees. This digital process of laying materials on top of a photographic layer is a dynamic equivalent of Surrealist techniques like double exposures, combination printing, and photomontage. The Surrealists, too, thought of the photographic image as base layer on which materials could be added to "evoke the union of dream and reality" (The Met, par. 2). The photo was (and is) seen as a representation of reality—a document. To edit the photo was to edit realism: one could add to what is seen solely perceptually. Continuing this thinking, Layar artistically adds onto a dynamic tableau. Its use is perhaps more utilitarian than the absurdism the Surrealists embodied, but from a process point of view, but the augmented reality application and the Surrealist photographic techniques literally accomplished similar goals.

The Internet's penchant for constant data streams, however, resonates with Surrealism on a more conceptual basis. The way that online services create, monitor, and

capture continuous flows of information has strong ties to automatism. Take, for example, Google StreetView. The service gives users a visual context to road maps, allowing the user the see what's on the street level from their computers. However, the creation of this service strongly parallels the methodology of Surrealist automatism. StreetView images are captured with 9 cameras mounted on top of a Google branded car, each positioned to capture a different angle of 360-degree panorama. As the StreetView Car drives, the cameras continuously capture images and stitch a complete picture of the road, which is then tagged with the car's satellite-positioned location. In this sense, the driver engages an automatic process in which he is constantly and ceaselessly creating. However, unless the open-road unlocks a trance-like state for him, the creation of StreetView photography does not engage the driver's subconscious.

But in the language of new media, this is not what is important. As Mark Tribe wrote in "New Media Art":

"Much as Dada was in part a reaction to the industrialization of warfare and the mechanical reproduction of texts and images, New Media art can be seen as a response to the information technology revolution and the digitization of cultural forms." (7-8)

It is the camera whose automatism comes to light. New media engages the machine of information technology. This constant capturing

process still echoes automatism, but it is not the photographer's subconscious that is being tapped: it is the camera's subconscious, its inner-workings. In particular instances, the camera shows itself with a glitch: a clash of color and pixelization that sometimes appears among other StreetView images. In these moments, the digital image reveals its core. Red, green, and blue channels sometimes separate; or two positions on the road sometimes merge. When the surface is scratched, the user becomes privy to how the image is created.

Superficially, the glitches actually come to resemble some Surrealist works. Vane Bor, a Serbian Surrealist, created photograms which shares strong visual similarities with StreetView glitches. Forms blur up, down, and across to illustrate a cave-like environment. In more typical cases, users can track progressions over time in a single plane as the StreetView Car drives down the street. Jenny Odell, an artist who works with these images writes of her encounter with a man on StreetView:

"Clicking forward and facing backward, one could watch this man cross the street and disappear into one of the buildings. I returned many times; he was always in the same place, forever crossing the same street into the same building."

One can imagine, here, Marcel Duchamp's "Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2": frames of movement captured and placed into a two-dimensional frame, overlapping one another.

However, web services and their methods of automatism are not limited to unlocking the subconscious of machines. Some services specifically monitor our inner-workings and display them back to us. These services, which are programmed to watch web users behavior to "improve their user experience," tacitly mimic the Surrealist practice of speed and trance on the user; and therefore they unlock our subconscious in ways purposefully entering a trance-like state cannot. Google, again, is an excellent example. The search engine giant finds what it perceives to be the most "important" results, and it organizes them as such. Importance is defined in part by examining a user's history: when any user engages one of Google's many services, a record is made of the user's activity. Emails that are typed, queries that are searched, and posts that are made are all "crawled" for data that tells a story about the user's behavior. From this data, the web service forms a picture of how the use implicitly acts to craft a personalized online experience: where they tend to click more often, what type of videos they are more likely to watch, and other small workings of the user's subconscious decision-making process. This data harvesting is, of course, invisible to the user—obscured by a length Terms of Service agreement. Through this method, the user contributes to an automatic process where data is actually being created mindlessly. Contrary to Surrealist practice, the individual does not have to actively engage the trance because it happens algorithmically: the machine unlocks the unconscious. In this sense, an Internet-aided automatism actually achieves the goal of subconsciously more thoroughly and analytically.

In a Dali-esque cue, the web service in fact ponders upon the subconscious data and acts after analyzing. User data is compiled and utilized to create promoted material

and advertisements. In viewing these promotions and advertisements, the user is presented with a mirror, a record of their subconscious. Their subconscious data is targeted and put back on display for them to become immediately aware.

II: Horizontality and Free Association

"Surrealism rests on the belief in the superior reality of certain forms of association hitherto neglected, in the omnipotence of the dream, and in the disinterested play of thought." (Surrealist Manifesto, 13)

Structurally, the Internet, as a massive-body of hyperlinks, is an ideal state of Surrealist associations. As all information on the Internet is organized horizontally (that is, non-hierarchically), a user is free to make any jump from topic to topic. Whereas older organizational systems really on cascading categories and hierarchies to organize information (e.g. "things" > "animals" > "reptiles" > "snakes" > "copperheads"), the Internet has everything linked on one layer. Any particular website can link to any other website. A user can jump straight from "things" to "copperheads" and then to "Nietzsche," and it likely all make sense. There is no descent through hierarchies online because everything is in hypertext. The web's organization, instead, relies on the notion that content generators will create link structures that *make sense*. The most basic assumption is that those who create websites will not simply hyperlink to random information: they will hyperlink to information that is relevant to their own content.

The Internet's horizontality provides a perfect platform for ideal Surrealist associations. While the Surrealists sought the free associations of automatism, the Internet

allows for it on both conscious and subconscious levels. Non-hierarchical systems of organization are largely unprecedented, making the Internet certainly a "form of information hitherto neglected."

Part of this horizontality, though, allows for greater accessibility to information, which—deductively—also contributes to an ideal Surrealist form of association. In The Present Age, Kierkegaard laments that with increased access to information, so comes increased nihilism. He writes on the proliferation of information as "gains in extensity what it loses in intensity" (79). When information becomes wildly accessible to the public sphere it becomes wildly insignificant: everything is available with the same degree of importance, so everything becomes equally unimportant. In contrast with the authority of a physical location to house the archive, the abstraction of locality makes information comfortably accessible. Specifically, the daily newspaper and the popularity of cafe culture erased locality: people could now extend their reach of knowledge outside their immediate contexts. However, Kierkegaard claims, the comfort of accessibility is coupled with the subversion of passion and commitment. When that powerful physical location is lost and when everything is equally obtainable, people cast broad nets to garner a variety of topics but they do not master specific areas of study.

The Internet, as we know, is proclaimed as the next great equalizer of accessibility. Everyone with an Internet connection is hypothetically privy to the same wealth of information. This is a fully realized state of Kierkegaard's nightmare. Hubert L. Dreyfus writes:

"In newsgroups, anyone, anywhere, any time, can have an opinion on anything. All

are only too eager to respond to the equally deracinated opinions of other

anonymous amateurs who post their views from nowhere. [...] In a blog anyone can

express his or her opinion about anything without needing any experience and

without accepting any responsibility. But since putting one's ideas into practice and

so taking risks and learning from one's failures and successes are required for

acquiring expertise, most bloggers have no wisdom to contribute." (78)

The Internet, as an open archive abstracted from physical space, sheds its locality in favor

of comfort and accessibility; but the idealistic anti-elitist philosophy, according to Dreyfus,

encourages an exponential decrease in the quality of knowledge and contribution. Instead

of thoughtful discussion transitioning into informed action, the Internet permanently dwells

on discussion and casting a broad net that looks at every problem from endless new

perspectives. Reflection never transitions into action on the Internet, Dreyfus claims. And

because action never takes place and because higher-level learning requires physical

experience, learned skills can never advance beyond competency. Subsequently, when

there are no masters or experts, the degradation of available information is compounded.

Here, we are reminded of Breton's yearning for "the disinterested play of thought"

as an ideal of Surrealism. As Dreyfus and Kierkegaard have noted, the Internet as an open

archive of accessible information inspires disinterest: the Internet does not foster intensity

in knowledge. As such, users are free once-over to explore the Web's horizontality. There

is no obligation to stick to one subject, so a user's mind may run free over topics as if in an

automatic state. Imagine a teenager on the Internet, having grown up with this tool,

mindlessly browsing from site to site. There is no particular interest, but the freedom to

think as such is in strong accordance with Surrealist principles.

III: Moving Forward

A central component to Surrealism, though, is its carried-over Dada tendencies. Should the Internet and New Media fully reach an accomplished state of Surrealist ideals, it must take these Dada traits into account. Working with the structural assumption that allows non-hierarchical information organization to work, one could mimic the most Dada of characteristics: the desire to break an audience's expectations with absurdity. In order to emulate Dada's "classics of audience frustration and confusion," new media must because "a weapon against convention" (Gale, 53-4).

Much like Tristan Tzara and Hugo Ball, who deliberately attacked the existing convention of theatre to shock audiences, artists must attack the existing convention of the Internet. The web has already built up a reputation of information accessibility, and as an accepted institution it can be exploited to push the Dada agenda. If content generators stop hyperlinking with logic and rationale, a truly Surreal and absurd Internet experience could come to fruition.

In some ways, content generators are already moving towards this ideal: digital natives have begun using hashtags (devices for linking relevant content across a platform with a piffy keyword) colloquially. Hashtags have taken on use as overly specific "bottomline" announcements.

@FreeCooperUnion: "Too many security guards in the Prez's Office #BadGuardToStudentRatio"

This use negates a hashtag's purpose to create logic links between content. The hashtag "#BadGuardToStudentRatio" is unlikely to bring up any other relevant content. It's a dead-end and ultimately breaks an audience's expectation. Colloquially, hashtags are contributing to a more Surreal Internet.

But more could be done. Negating the Internet's structure involves more than social media content generation: it involves creating full websites with illogical navigation and absurd layouts. Creating a website from search (as opposed to plugging content into an existing website) allows the opportunity to make a truly disorienting experience.

In this light, we can once again draw comparisons to the early 20th century. Currently, everyone is touching on automatism and Dada negation tactics. The system is watching our world and our online habits, and we're watching the system display that automatic analysis. We're engaged in a convention of free association, allowing us to automatically and disinterestedly move between ideas. To take another cue from Salvador Dali, artists must do more than tap their subconscious. They must do more than use hashtags colloquially. Artists must contemplate their dreams to create good Surreal paintings: they must negate our trust in horizontality on a large scale by attempting to restructure the entirety of the Internet and create their own websites with absurd content and navigation.

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