INTERNATIONAL KUNSTVEREIN LUXEMBOURG

„STREET GHOSTS", 2012

In this project, I exposed the specters of Google's eternal realm of private, misappropriated data: the bodies of people captured by Google's Street View cameras, whose ghostly, virtual presence I marked in Street Art fashion at the precise spot in the real world where they were photographed.

Street Ghosts hit some of the most important international Street Art "halls of fame" with low-resolution, human scale posters of people taken from Google Street View. These images do not offer details, but the blurred colors and lines on the posters give a gauzy, spectral aspect to the human figures, unveiling their presence like a digital shadow haunting the real world.

This ready-made artwork simply takes the information amassed by Google as material to be used for art, despite its copyrighted status and private source.
As the publicly accessible pictures of individuals are taken without their permission, I reversed the act: I took the pictures of individuals without Google's permission and posted them on public walls. In doing so, I highlight the viability of this sort of medium as an artistic material ready to comment and shake our society.
The collections of data that Google and similar corporations have become the material of everyday life, yet their source is the personal information of private individuals. By remixing and reusing this material, I artistically explore the boundaries of ownership and exposure of this publicly displayed, privately-held information about our personal lives.

In this case, the artwork becomes a performance, re-contextualizing not only data, but also a conflict. It's a performance on the battlefield, playing out a war between public and private interests for winning control on our intimacy and habits, which can change permanently depending on the victor. Who has more strength in this war? The artist, the firm, the legislators, the public concern or the technology?
This reconfiguration of informational power provokes engagement between those social agents, who are recruited through simple visual exposure.

Ghostly human bodies appear as casualties of the info-war in the city, a transitory record of collateral damage from the battle between corporations, governments, civilians and algorithms. Some of this battle has played out in the courts: for instance, the Swiss and German governments have placed legal restrictions [1] on Google, claiming that capturing people on the street in this way violates their privacy. Google rejoins with the accuracy of its facial blurring algorithm, though it doesn't always work [2]. But even if it does, this is hypocrisy: the rest of their bodies, their hair or clothes are more than enough to identify them, especially for someone really interested in their private lives.

On the street, the public encounters the random victims of this war as unclear, impermanent colors and shapes, inclined to fade away but always there, like ghosts haunting the streets and sometimes reappearing from the ethereal hells of digital archives.

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The obscure figures fixed to the walls are the murky intersection of two overlain worlds: the real world of things and people, from which these images were originally captured, and the virtual afterlife of data and copyrights, from which the images were retaken. The virtual world, as a transposition of the real world into an enclosure owned by multinational corporations, is no less real for its seeming withdrawal; it has material effects. Media is the interface that bridges the two worlds, and maintains a constant mutual influence between them. By going back to the spot where information has been extracted from the physical world and de-virtualizing it, critical points emerge.

Google didn't ask permission to appropriate images of all the world's towns and cities [3], nor did it pay anything to do so. It sells ads against this public and private content, and then resells the information collected to the same advertisers, making billions that aren't even taxed [4]. It's a sort of exploitation by a giant social parasite that resells us what was collectively created by people's activity and money.

The public display of this biopolitical surplus from Google's value-harvesting campaigns – the people aren't supposed to appear in the pictures, but they do – appropriates their aesthetic and political value, as opposed to the commercial. Google appropriates the social labor we perform by constituting the public; simply by investing the city with social meaning, we unintentionally provide value for Google to capture. This Street Art intervenes by confronting the public with the aesthetic qualities of the data they didn't even know they were alienating, and forces them to reckon with the possibility of their own image appearing as ghostly slaves trapped in a digital world forever.

Paolo Cirio
NYC, Septemebr 15th 2012

Notes

[1] The Register: Google calls halt on German Street View

[2] NYTs: Swiss Court Orders Modifications to Google Street View

[3] NYT: Coming Soon, Google Street View of a Canadian Village You'll Never Drive To.

[4] Daily Mail: How Google avoided paying £218m in tax: Internet giant's cash-saving deal on £2.6bn UK earnings –
      ABC News: Google and Other U.S. Companies Dodge Billions in Taxes, Bloomberg Reports