Even art has left the spaces of enclosure in order to enter into the open circuits of the bank.

- Gilles Deleuze, “Protocrit on the Societies of Control,” 1992

In 1970, at the height of the Vietnam War, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, opened the now-semiannual exhibition Information, which posited that art could not function in isolation from rapidly expanding global networks. Curator Kynaston McShine wrote, “Art cannot afford to be provincial, or to exist within only its own history, or to continue to be, perhaps, only a commentary on art. An alternative had been to extend the idea of art, to renew the definition, and to think beyond the traditional categories.” Within this new environment, McShine suggested, the artist must act as interpreter not only for an elite, museum-going public, but for a wider audience trying to make sense of the implications of this daily sensory onslaught: “The public is constantly bombarded with strong visual imagery, be it in the newspapers or periodicals, on television, or in the cinema. An artist certainly cannot compete with a man on the moon in the living room. This has therefore created an ambiguous and ironic position for the artist, a dilemma as to what he can do with contemporary media that reach many more people than the art gallery.”

Now, almost 45 years later, McShine’s prescient remarks are tinged with an increased urgency. Thanks to rapid technological advances, art and media historian Jonathan Crary hypothesizes that we are now living in a “24/7” environment, from which we can never truly be disconnected, and is the result of an ascendant “global infrastructure for continuous work and consumption.”

In this hyper-networked, always-on system, it becomes impossible to disengage—we willingly or unwillingly take part in a voyeuristic cycle where we are always either watching or being watched. As Crary explains, the emergence of this system as a voyeuristic cycle where we are always either watching or being watched. In this context, we might ask, how should the role of the artist shift? Not only have the ways in which information is distributed, channels of communication are forged, and images are circulated become more diffuse and democratic, but, accordingly, there is a wider array of media available to artists than ever before. Private Matters brings together a group of artists who, through individual strategies of sharing various kinds of secure information with the audience, eliminates the boundaries between public and private.Secrets are revealed, security measures of institutions are tested, and myths—both personal and collective—are interrogated. These works share a reliance on technology, which has become an integral factor in the way that we interact with others now, through various media we share our statuses, moods, and follow each other in an endless voyeuristic cycle. Today, public access to what once was considered privileged information is a social reality, pointing to broader changes in the construction of our relationships and emphasizing the fact that—in our networked environment—virtually no information is private anymore.

Private Matters

Organized by
Ceren Erdem
Jaime Schwartz
Lisa Hayes Williams

January 16 - March 1, 2014

Featuring work by:
Becca Albee and Kathleen Hanna
Maria Antelman
Nilbar Güreş
Trevor Paglen
Stephanie Syjuco
Pilvi Takala

You can support what we do at www.apexart.org/support.php

Becca Albee and Kathleen Hanna, In Case Of—New York City, 2009, Found objects, vitrine, dimensions variable (detail)

Nilbar Güreş, In her Webcam Sex series, Nilbar Güreş (Austria/Turkey) depicts seemingly bizarre scenes on fabric of imaginary homes and the daily lives of the characters who engage in private sexual acts online via webcam. Digital cultures provide unlimited leeway for individuals to choose new identities, whether fictitious or not, and to change personal qualities and facts about their actual self, such as gender, age, physical appearance, or any personal preferences. Anonymity is the key feature of this setting. A virtual geography is constituted by the result of new experiences with a different kind of perception, one that is at a distance. In cases of seeking intimacy as well as exposure and liberty, the online world provides an oasis, allowing an individual to lead a commentary on art. An alternative had been to extend the idea of art, to renew the definition, and to think beyond the traditional categories.

Within this new environment, McShine suggested, the artist must act as interpreter not only for an elite, museum-going public, but for a wider audience trying to make sense of the implications of this daily sensory onslaught: “The public is constantly bombarded with strong visual imagery, be it in the newspapers or periodicals, on television, or in the cinema. An artist certainly cannot compete with a man on the moon in the living room. This has therefore created an ambiguous and ironic position for the artist, a dilemma as to what he can do with contemporary media that reach many more people than the art gallery.”

Now, almost 45 years later, McShine’s prescient remarks are tinged with an increased urgency. Thanks to rapid technological advances, art and media historian Jonathan Crary hypothesizes that we are now living in a ‘24/7’ environment, from which we can never truly be disconnected, and is the result of an ascendant ‘global infrastructure for continuous work and consumption.’

In this hyper-networked, always-on system, it becomes impossible to disengage—we willingly or unwillingly take part in a voyeuristic cycle where we are always either watching or being watched. As Crary explains, the emergence of this system as a voyeuristic cycle where we are always either watching or being watched. In this context, we might ask, how should the role of the artist shift? Not only have the ways in which information is distributed, channels of communication are forged, and images are circulated become more diffuse and democratic, but, accordingly, there is a wider array of media available to artists than ever before. Private Matters brings together a group of artists who, through individual strategies of sharing various kinds of secure information with the audience, eliminates the boundaries between public and private. Secrets are revealed, security measures of institutions are tested, and myths—both personal and collective—are interrogated. These works share a reliance on technology, which has become an integral factor in the way that we interact with others now, through various media we share our statuses, moods, and follow each other in an endless voyeuristic cycle. Today, public access to what once was considered privileged information is a social reality, pointing to broader changes in the construction of our relationships and emphasizing the fact that—in our networked environment—virtually no information is private anymore.

Private Matters BROCHURE & invite 11/14/14 4:36 PM
a parallel life. Güre’s collages often explore female and queer identities and the ways in which domestic and public spaces are constructed in relation to these. Webcam Sex, Voyeur (2012) depicts the deconstructed apartment of an online sex worker. While the black backgrounds employed in this series conjure dark, claustrophobic vibes, the scattered household goods and the bright colors of the monitors in the collage point to the most important part of the scene—that we are voyeurs, both in this dark, claustrophobic rooms, the scattered household goods and the undersides of the screen.

In an attempt to expose the complex social structures that lie beneath our daily interactions, it is worthwhile to take a closer look at how our infrastructure—streets, parks, supermarkets, offices, public institutions—is organized and manipulated. Through her work, Plivi Takala (Finland) works to subvert these predetermined social settings. By observing people’s reactions in specific cultural situations, Takala effectively exposes the level of control—and the resultant paranoia—that people have come to expect in society today. The artist intervenes in various situations herself, often covertly and even making use of spy cameras. Acting as interlocutor, she is able to provoke impromptu reactions from those around her by creating social tension. By exposing such structures, Takala reveals the unwritten codes of conduct that underlie the public operations of these organizations. Her video, Broad Sense (2011), documents an incursion she made within the European Parliament (E.P.) in Brussels, in order to test the security measures, codes, and conduits in this governmental institution. After obtaining a badge to attend public hearings at the Parliament, Takala contacted the local E.P. office of each member state, asking the same question regarding the regulations for the dress code in the building. Upon receiving miscellaneous replies on the matter, she made the answer more and more ambiguous, until the moment when the security guards noticed that she was making the text of each office’s response to her email and attended some public hearings. Over the course of the day, her repeated exit and reentry of the building created disturbances.

Meanwhile, another work by Paglen takes a different, more overt stance. Symbology, Volume IV (2013), 203 Fabric patches, framed, 1.27 H x 0.76 W x 0.03 D (variable) is a set of patches designed in defense jargon as “black worlds.” While he is interested in the documentary function of the photographic medium, Paglen’s images do not simply constitute reportage, but rather are more nuanced and require careful looking in order to determine the information encoded within. In one work, the viewer is confronted with a seemingly idyllic skyscape with stratus bands of orange light of a beautiful sunset. However, the title of the work—United (Predator Drone) (2012)—reveals that superficial appearances such as this romantic scene may be deceiving and that the answer more and more ambiguous, until the moment when the security guards noticed that she was making the text of each office’s response to her email and attended some public hearings. Over the course of the day, her repeated exit and reentry of the building created disturbances.

In a different mode, Maria Antelam’s (Greece/USA) video work, World, Serenade (2009), juxtaposes dreamy black-and-white images from the 1960s of the lunar surface with random shortwave radio transmissions thought to be the recordings of encrypted military espionage broadcast via a numbers station. These garbled frequencies, which were used to communicate covertly during the Cold War and are still employed even now by spies, allowed for the coded transmission of highly classified information over public airwaves. The coupling of these expressive registers—a sense of possible innocence conjoined with single-minded paranoia—implies both a specific moment in history as well as a more general human condition that often lies just beneath the surface and, on the flip side, conspiracy theories hatched out of suspicion of achievement. Just as widespread access to once-confidential information has become the norm, likewise the distinction between public and private has nearly dissipated. In the age of Twitter, when any conversation or encounter had in public space has the potential to be broadcast live to hundreds, thousands, or millions of followers, there are new precautions we now must take in order to feel secure, both physically and psychologically. Reflecting upon widespread paranoia and the desire to safeguard the self against emergency, threat, or danger, Becca Albee and Kathleen Hanna’s (USA) installation, In Case Of / New York City (2009), investigates the physical implications of privacy and how it relates to our sense of security. By asking the question, “What do you carry that gives you a sense of security?” to random New York City women, Albee and Hanna collected an assortment of everyday objects, talismans, and protective items ranging from cosmetics, medications, and coffee, to boxer cutters, mace, and maps that were carried for mean and the Latin words semper in obscurus (Always in the Dark), the existence of these cartoon-like patches contradicts the crucial classified status of the programs. In the ceremonious environment of the military and intelligence services, wearing certain badges assures one’s position as the artist building created disturbances, distending the set rules of access.

Stephanie Syjuco’s (USA) sculptures and installations engage the circulation and distribution of typically protected information. Her work, FREE TEXTS, comprises a wall of pull-tab flyers, like those that one might see on a university campus, that advertise the URLs to various texts related to issues of digital copyright, open source culture, alternatives to capitalism, and the state of the intellectual commons today. Her works, many of which have been uploaded by anonymous file sharers around the world, call attention to issues of commodification and the commodification of ideas and information in the digital era. Syjuco’s offer for a free library engages the public in a dialogue of ownership of information. Her overarching project of universal access relates to the advocacy campaign for greater file sharing by Internet activist Aaron Swartz, who in 2008 wrote the widely circulated Open Access Guerilla Manifesto, and whose tragic suicide in 2011 was linked to criminal charges brought against him for illegally downloading academic journals.

Gilles Deleuze famously noted in the 1990s that we had moved past this model to a new one in which our lives are regulated by institutions and governmental agencies. Today, you might argue, we have moved past this increasingly artificial model into a different and unprecedented one—a surveillance society, where we are acutely aware that at any moment we might be observed by the government, by a stranger, or even by our family and friends. In a state where technology is advancing at a faster clip than ever before throughout the world and accessible to everyone’s use, power and influence are no longer limited to those who are literate.


2 Ibid.
3 Jonathan Crary, 24/7: Late Capitalism and the End of Sleep (London and Brooklyn: Zone Books, 2011), p.3
4 Ibid., p.8.

Stephanie Syjuco, FREE TEXTS: An Open Source Artwork about Copyright and the Internet, 2011, laserjet print on paper, dimensions variable

Private Matters BROCHURE & POST 3

Trevor Paglen’s (USA) photography work, An inside look: the inside out, depicts the deconstructed apartment of an online sex worker. While the black backgrounds employed in this series conjure dark, claustrophobic vibes, the scattered household goods and the bright colors of the monitors in the collage point to the most important part of the scene—that we are voyeurs, both in this dark, claustrophobic rooms, the scattered household goods and the undersides of the screen.