

Drawing_in_the_Media_Stream

Tony Allard and Kristine Diekman

California State University, San Marcos
California, USA
tallard@csusm.edu; kdiekman@csusm.edu

Abstract

By way of Paul Virilio's arguments put forth in *The Vision Machine*, we disrupt, critique and present alternatives to the loss of short and long-term visual memory and the production and packaging of sanctioned images as the result of visionics, super-synthetic machine-generated vision. This hybrid media installation entitled, *Drawing_in_the_Media_Stream*, negotiates the collision between traditional forms of perceptual drawing and visionics, and a way to offer more lasting personalized and collective memories of the short-term presence of media images.

Keywords

Paul Virilio, drawing, visionics, media stream, memory, images, machine vision, accelerationist

Introduction

**“Now objects perceive me.”
--Paul Klee**

Drawing_in_the_Media_Stream is a hybrid installation that integrates small-scale drawings on disposable pieces of cardboard and newspaper, large-scale drawings on gallery walls, and ephemeral digital drawings and projections. The drawings are responses to sanctioned mass media images found on the Internet, newspapers and television. The installation functions in two steps; one being an immediate response to breaking news story images through the dense accumulation of drawings in a three dimensional space while the next step is a rendering of highly selective images in charcoal on the gallery walls.

The process of creating the drawings for this installation critique and disrupt the compulsive production of virtual images that are fed 24/7 into the global media stream. The installation has two primary aspects: 1) the critique of the loss of short and long-term visual memory; and 2) the disruption of the production and packaging of sanctioned images as the result of visionics, of which breaking news stories from major media conglomerates are one example. Visionics is Paul Virilio's term for techno-culture's new visuality grounded in synthetic, machine-generated vision, automated perception and contemplation. [1]

The Critique of the Loss of Short and Long-Term Memory

News writing and photo aggregation are part of this system of visionics, wherein the computer analyzes and compiles the images and produces an unexamined database relatively devoid of human evaluation. It is “artificial contemplation”. [2]

“After all, aren't they talking about producing a 'vision machine' in the near future, a machine that would be capable not only of recognizing the contours of shapes, but also of completely interpreting the visual field, of staging a complex environment close-up or at a distance? Aren't they also talking about the new technology of 'visionics': the possibility of achieving *sightless vision* whereby the video camera would be controlled by a computer? The computer would be responsible for the machine's - rather than the viewer's - capacity to analyze the ambient environment and automatically interpret the meaning of events.” [3]

The loss of personal visual memories that this virtual glut of transient, machine-based images produces comes at a cost, the alienation of the individual from the culture at large. The author Marita Sturken has written extensively about the relationship of personal memory and cultural memory, and how images work to formulate these. Certain images create a shared memory of an event, such as images from 911, or images of torture from Abu Ghraib, or other national, traumatic images. Individuals relate to those events with personal memory, but the image can also instigate a shared memory within a nation or culture. [7] However, we are aware that visionics, as a form of implicit censorship, algorithmically controls and hyper-objectively sanctions images of what we are allowed to see and how we see it, and therefore how we remember the event—if we even remember the event in the torrent at all.

While in the glare and glut of these images, we are compelled to question what an image is, and by extension, the function of representation and its reception. We ask ourselves the question, how can any meaningful represen-

tation be created from the extremely temporary representations produced by the 24/7 global media stream? Our notion of what an image is has been profoundly transformed by the invention of a series of mass media technologies, such as the printing press in the 14th century, still and moving image cameras during the industrial revolution, video in the mid twentieth century, and on up to augmented reality in the present digital age. Today, an image is no longer a static, analogue, one of a kind object with one point of reception, but rather, it is dynamic, navigable digital data that can be viewed simultaneously in thousands upon thousands of discrete points of reception around the globe. In essence, an image is no longer an object but an event, the meaning of which is not static, but is also dynamic, mutable, ever changing. To restate Virilio's description of the transformation of the image, the perspective of space is being replaced by the perspective of time.

The marks that make up a machine made image have been dematerialized. In the digital realm, marks are no longer discrete traces on a stable surface, but rather, are infinitely mutable bits of data with no stable location in time or space. In the relativistic realm of the bitmapped or vectorized images, marks and the surfaces they are presented on are more akin to the transitory light and shadows that make up the moving images of video and computer-based simulations, animations and motion graphics. The visible marks that momentarily coalesce on screen are part of a hyper-ephemeral representation that never comes to rest in the comfort of our conventional senses of representation or realism. The analogue and virtual drawings in DIMS create a fusion of space-time representations that nimbly respond to the urgent news story images. This fusion ultimately forms more lasting visual memories than those created by the extremely ephemeral media mirages.

With the status of the image now being primarily event-based, its function in the formation of historical and personal memory has undergone a radical transformation as well. Virilio frankly points out that the ultra objective, high speed vision machines have thrown serious doubt on the veracity of human vision and memory making. In the strategic militarization of sightless vision, the vision machine sees autonomously. There is no one behind it looking. The violence implicit in statistical vision extends even to Virilio's critique of the mobile phone. Although a seemingly less destructive machine, he condemns the ubiquity of hand held communications in their ability to take up every moment through constant contact creating a "collectivized affect" that is quite different from the way that personal and cultural memory is formed. But how do we come to terms with the "epidemic of cooperation" delivered through mobile phones and the personalized activity of visual memorization? When visionics is replaced by human perception, then what does it mean for artist to do the looking for others? We propose that this form of intimate contact and reproduction through drawing can create a space for the artist and the viewer to engage in "prolonged

introspection" that is currently "monopolized by the outsourcing of our once immediate sensations." [6]

Virilio refers to this as statistical intoxication, "a blurring of perception that affects the real as much as the figurative, as though our society were sinking into the darkness of a voluntary blindness, its will to digital power finally contaminating the horizon of sight as well as knowledge." [4]-The drawings we produce in our hybrid installation attempt to reclaim and integrate human vision and visual memory making with visionics, techno culture's headlong plunge into machine-based, sightless vision and image making. The drawings are not a rejection of the "industrialization of vision". [5] They are hybrid representations, visual memories created from immediate personal perception combined with perceptions of the new super synthetic vision machines. In the installation we integrate slow and accelerated media in our efforts to reclaim short and long term memory.

It is in this tenuous but compelling space and time of doubt and questioning that we are now drawing and thus memorizing our way through the media stream. This installation is an attempt to draw in the liminal space between object and event in order to regain our relationship to the image during this loss of personal and lasting visual memories of our times. As media artists, drawing is an integral part of our artistic process that allows for the reinstatement of visual memory making into the personal and public realm of contemplation.

The Disruption of Sanctioned Images

Corporate content providers of the global media stream use visionics and "artificial contemplation" to efficiently sanction and virally distribute the meaning of breaking news story images. These meanings are taken at face value as they momentarily flash on our screens because we have almost no time to contemplate their meaning and truthfulness before the torrent of the media stream swallows them up and washes them downstream to be forgotten. Over the duration of the installation we counter this by drawing everyday in the gallery space, tapping into the media stream and closely examining these unexamined meanings as they algorithmically go viral throughout the day. Ideally, our drawings disrupt the image torrent to create a more lasting personal and collective memory of these events.

The high speed aggregation, packaging and viral distribution of these breaking news story images does not allow for a prolonged introspection or particularization of individual lives. An example of how the gluttonous 24/7 global media stream creates a loss of extended contemplation and our critique of this can be seen in our installation. One of the videos and some of the drawings for the installation are based on photographs and text from a New York Times article of 2008 detailing how the U.S. had reached a

deadly milestone of 500 troops who had died in Afghanistan. In the article, troops were represented by a statistical bar graph. [8] The article also related the story of a mother whose son, Matthew D. Blaskowski, was killed by a sniper. After his death, she received an email from a television journalist who had inadvertently recorded a video of him at the moment of his death. The mother watched it compulsively, to see “how it – the bullet—found him.” We combined her text with video and portrait drawings we did of the specific troops, disturbing the shorthand of statistical graphic representation, in an attempt to particularize this soldier’s death, rather than see it as a machine-made abstract sign of loss.

The hardware and software that have coalesced in the cell phone have, for the first time, afforded millions of individuals around the globe the ability to capture, freeze and send an image in real time of an event. For the first time these maximally efficient vision machines give people agency at street level to send and receive images. Putting aside the human vision versus machine vision issue, an analogy can be made between these crowd-sourced, machine-made visual memories and the graphically re-interpreted images in our drawings in that they step outside of the system of sanctioned images.



Figure 1. Installation view, “AT&T”, charcoal wall drawing, 16’ x 12’, Southwestern College, USA, 2008

The drawings we physically produce on the walls of the gallery, on cardboard and on daily newspapers provide a slow media, physical location to contemplate a tiny sector of the database that was formerly bereft of in-depth human contemplation and evaluation. By choosing particular images from the daily media stream to draw and thus re-remember, we are simultaneously questioning the truthfulness and meaning of these images, while at the same time we are augmenting the meaning of the vision machines’ images. While we were creating the first iteration of the installation in San Diego in the summer of 2008, there were several mega media events happening that generated many viral images and memes to examine: the pro-

tests in Iran over the rigged re-election of Ahmadinejad, the Olympics in Beijing, Obama’s campaigning in Europe and the supreme court’s ruling that the major telecom companies could not be sued by US citizens for handing over their personal data to the US government after 911. We created two very large opposing wall drawings, one of the AT&T logo and the other of Donald Rumsfeld, Dick Cheney and George Bush. In our drawing process we made a connection between these two seemingly unrelated media stories, by revealing AT&T’s hypocritical sponsoring of the Olympics in Beijing and the Supreme Court’s ruling to absolve the major telecom companies of any wrong doing in their data mining of U.S. citizens’ personal data. (Figures 1, 2)

The juxtaposition of these two drawings question the truth-branding of a media image and generate a commentary through political references and irony. By producing drawings of familiar, but fleeting, images from the global media stream we disrupt and interrupt the sanctioned reading of these images. We make an incision in the media stream and extract the images through drawing to isolate and magnify the content, then refocus it through recombination.



Figure 2. Installation view, “Vision Verified”, charcoal wall drawing, 16’ x 12’, Southwestern College, USA, 2008

Capitalism’s accelerationist mania for maintaining the steady stream of a commodifiable surplus of novelty serves as the background on which mass media operates. The result is that media spectacles as a form of surplus novelty are consumed and forgotten. We approach the glutinous 24/7 global media stream by conscientiously appropriating the accelerationist techniques and esthetics of image accumulation. As Steven Shaviro writes, “In such a climate, nothing is more prized than excess. The further out you go, the more there is to accumulate and capitalize upon.” [9] However, we short circuit the nullifying effects of excess by extracting specific images and then begin a deep contemplation of the images by re-drawing them. Through the use of slow media, such as drawing on a gal-

lery wall with charcoal, we disrupt the loss of short and long-term memory that results from the ultra entropic accelerationist siphoning off of any appreciable meanings in breaking news story images. Literally slowing down to the speed of a static, one-of-a-kind image, affords the viewer the option to step outside the torrent and, anachronistically, sit still with the re-drawn and re-remembered breaking news story images. Drawings in the installation create a local site where the public can share with us in the formation of more long-term memories of these breaking news story images that normally flash on our short-term memory and are then washed downstream and forgotten.

In Virilio's critique of synthetic perception he asks us to ethically consider the "philosophical question of the *splitting of viewpoint*, the sharing of perception of the environment between the animate (the living subject) and the inanimate (the object, the seeing machine)." [10] Even before the advent of what is referred to as the "post-photographic" era of digital art, performance and installation artists since the 1960's have negotiated the ethical and political territory of the techno-phenomenological meshing of the body with the machine, later to be positioned as post-humanism. [11] We are refusing exclusion from the "automatic-perception prosthesis" by uniting digital drawing and its ephemeral manifestation in screen based art with physical mark making in the immersive environment of the installation space. (Figure 3) While we maintain the conventionally embodied practice of drawing, our corresponding production of dematerialized, mutable images plays a role in how human sensorial aggregation "enframes" digital information. [12] Continued future iterations of *Drawing_in_the_Media_Stream* will allow us to ethically engage, critique and disrupt the dichotomy between animate and inanimate, human vision and machine vision.

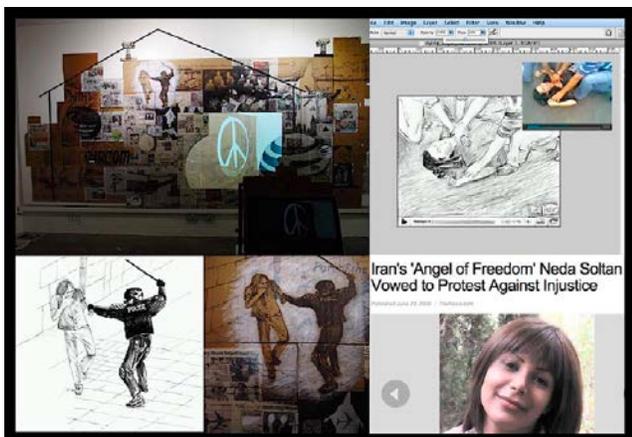


Figure 3. Installation view and digital drawings, Golden Thread Gallery, Belfast, Northern Ireland, 2009

References

- [1] Virilio, Paul. *The Vision Machine*. (Indiana University Press, 1994).
- [2] Paul Virilio, "The Vision Machine", in *The Virilio Reader*, ed. James Der Derian (Blackwell Publishers, 1998), p. 137.
- [3] Ibid., p. 134.
- [4] Virilio, Paul. *The Vision Machine*. (Indiana University Press, 1994), p. 76.
- [5] Paul Virilio, "The Vision Machine", in *The Virilio Reader*, ed. James Der Derian (Blackwell Publishers, 1998), p. 134.
- [6] Armitage, John. *Virilio and the Media*, (Wiley Press, 2012).
- [7] Sturken, Maritz. *Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, the AIDS Epidemic and the Politics of Remembering*, (University of California Press, 1997).
- [8] Kirk Semple and Andrew W. Lehren. "500: Deadly U.S. Milestone in Afghan War." *New York Times*, August 6, 2008.
- [9] Steven Shaviro. "Accelerationist Aesthetics: Necessary Inefficiency in Times of Real Subsumption". *e-flux, Journal #46*, June, 2013. http://www.e-flux.com/journal/accelerationist-aesthetics-necessary-inefficiency-in-times-of-real-subsumption/#_ftn11
- [10] Paul Virilio, "The Vision Machine", in *The Virilio Reader*, ed. James Der Derian (Blackwell Publishers, 1998), p. 135 - 137.
- [11] Techno-phenomenology is a term we borrow from Amelia Jones in her discussion of performance artists and audiences as "technologized subjects". Amelia Jones, *Body Art Performing the Subject*. (University of Minnesota Press, 1998).
- [12] Hansen, Mark B.N. *New Philosophy for New Media*, Forward by Timothy Lenoir. (MIT Press, 2004).