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Editorial – “Strange Universalism”

01/08

e-flux journal #86 — november 2017 Hito Steyerl, Julieta Aranda, Brian Kuan Wood, Stephen Squibb, and Anton Vidokle
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Imagine a big roll call. Names of nations, creeds, and genders are called out. Everyone is supposed to join their kin. Several hours later the crowd is all divided up into groups and subgroups, all neatly arranged on a large grid. There is just one person left. And this person says, “Sorry guys, I’m with the universe. Where do I go?”

The universe? It does not figure on the grid. Today, the most important question is not what belongs to whom but who belongs to what – as in what kind of group. Sameness trumps equality. Similarity beats solidarity. Reality is a battlefield. If the era of the October Revolution was epitomized by Malevich’s *Black Square*, the current one is ruled by Reality TV.

The struggle for reality characterizes today’s reactionary turn. Populisms try to define the “real” people and mark anyone else as “unreal” – thus anticipating their erasure from reality altogether. In the populist view, reality is defined as brute inevitability, by ranking, ratings, and elimination, by literally showing people their place.

But is identity a natural given, or is it also data? How about iPads, iPhones, ego brands? How about facial recognition? How about chips and keys and passwords? IPv6? Blockchain reputation systems? Technologies boost identities and make them happen. Identities in turn obscure technologies.

Identity today is not what it was even twenty years ago. It pops up as autofill suggestions in drop-down menus. It is intensified by punitive quantification, by viral lynch mobs, material deprivation, browser memory. Traditional identities ran on race, class, gender, plain loyalty, money, or memory. Contemporary ones add proprietary operating systems to this mix. How is your newsfeed organized? Your loyalty scheme? How does your credit score soar or shrink? Who owns your interactions or opinions? To know yourself and kin today, forget about a shaman or a shrink. You might need a Ukrainian hacker.¹

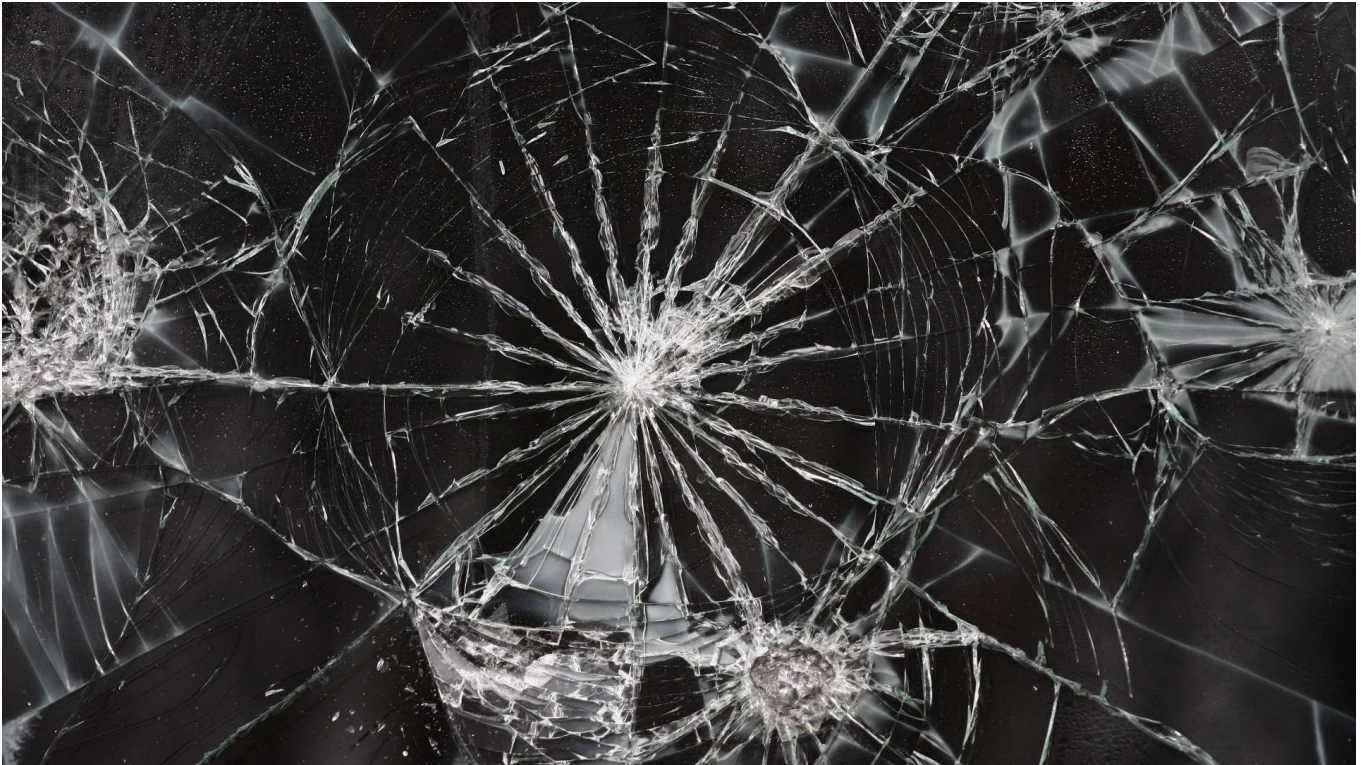
The roll call does not call people back to their origins or their true self. Rather, it drags them into an automated future. Identity appears *anew* when social relations are captured, privatized, and reorganized. Reality – the brute-force kind – is deeply algorithmic.

So, who does one belong to? Belonging is both about property and about social relations. Who owns social relations then?

Table Dance

Marx’s introduction to *Capital* features a cameo by a dancing table. The table, of course, is a commodity. It seems to move on its own, but this is an illusion. Its dance is animated by the

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A close-up photograph of a cracked iPhone screen.

interests and actions of the people around it, beneath it, behind it. Like a turning table, the commodity is animated by off-screen forces.²

Today the contrary applies. The table has transformed into a set of platforms, which turn people against one another, making their movements appear autonomous when they aren't. Their "dance" is animated by the interests and actions of underlying platforms – or rather than "animated": automated. To put it more succinctly: Digital platforms are not expressions of social relations among people. Social relations among people are automated by platforms.³

As technology churns out ever more universal aspirations – from cyberspace to the internet of everything to Ether – it works by segregation in high definition, fueled by organized depression, failing bureaucracy, magic sauce. Rancor is monetized. Rage fuels the machine. Hate pays off handsomely. Intensity is mined as industry. Digital chaos is a ladder, not a pit.⁴ It divides people into peoples: defined as customers-slash-clans, linked by ancestry or algorithm, DNA or DNS, being @real yet unequal.

How does technological identity management relate to right-wing troll-powered isolationism? Do today's reactionary identity politics anticipate systems of pervasive

technological address?⁵ Do protocols of future quantification already cast their shadow over contemporary reality? How come quantitative realism – a roll call of a different sort – aligns so well with nativist politics?

The algorithmic provocation of identity has engulfed art as well. Mega art shows gush about ritual and nonalienation while deploying clay and cymbals. But disavowing digital reality means falling under the spell of its prefabricated structures. Shows splinter into aggregated filter bubbles. Biography replaces context. Hashtag curating (#genocide) tosses ethnographic samples into 3-D space. As Marshall McLuhan flatly states: "A moral point of view too often serves as a substitute for understanding in technological matters."⁶

Black Square as Document

That's where we circle back to the October Revolution. If contemporary realisms are algorithmic, how about abstraction today? Or – what is the equivalent of *The Black Square* in the age of Reality TV?

Let's look at *The Black Square* again then, from the perspective of today. What if Malevich's *Black Square* was a documentary image? What if it actually showed the universe in the sense of

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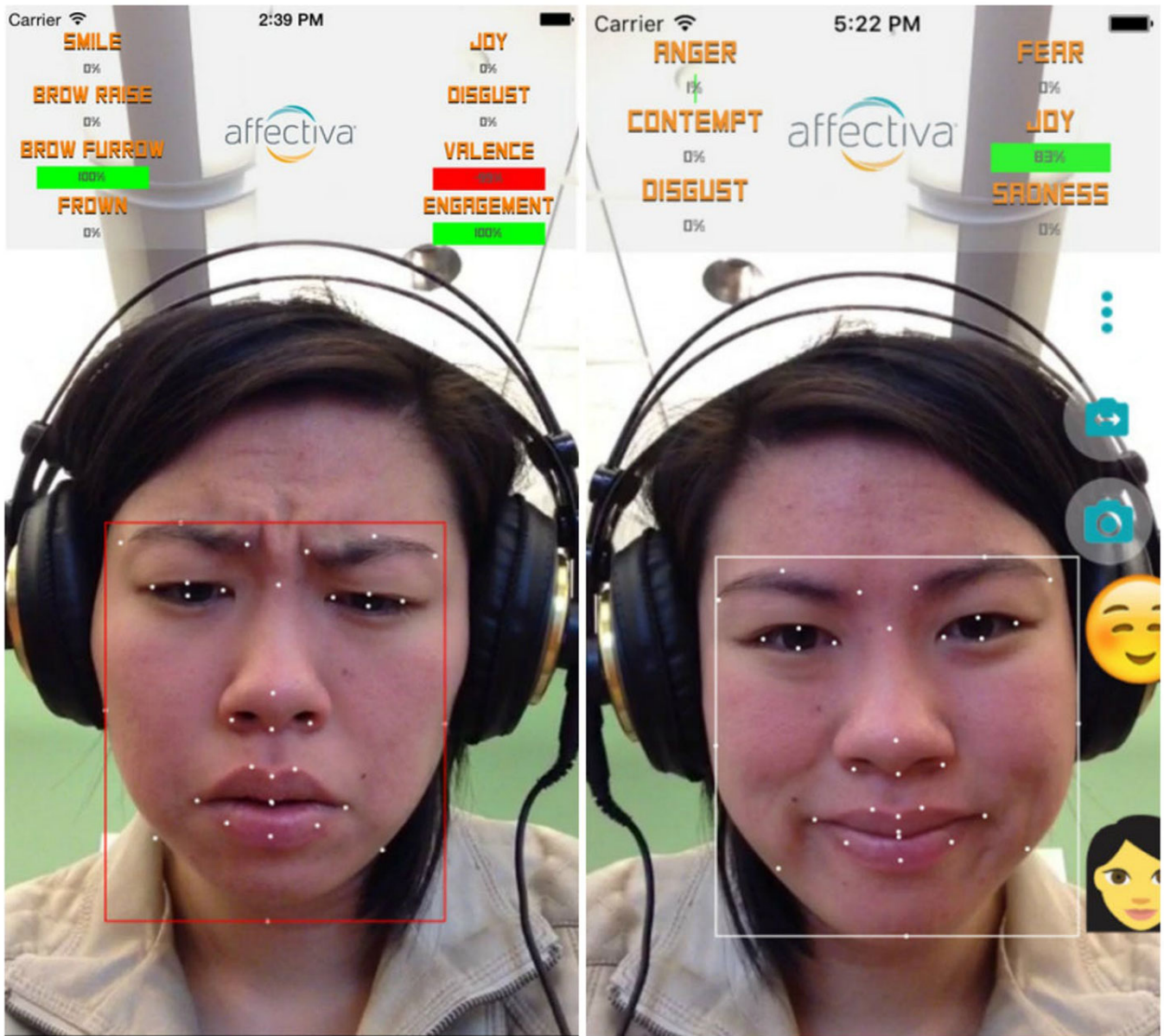


How to search for like-minded people IRL.



The worker's body dances around the chair in this exoskeleton design titled Chairless Chair by Sapetti.

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Affectiva's facial recognition software promises to automate affective labor with "emotional recognition." It does so by interpreting facial expressions into easily readable emojis for AI to customize responses to clients' different emotions.

outer space?⁷ This perspective on the universe would not be a claim on totality or monopoly, but a claim to reality itself, in its less-than-perfect, even fragmented form. *The Black Square* might show the universe in all its imperfection. From this point of view, the universe is not another territory to be ingested, not a frontier to be exploited and mined, not a maximalist scam or a kingdom come seen from above. It is a humble portrait in very low resolution – perhaps just one pixel, give or take.

This documentary approach to the universe is different from traditional philosophical or religious ideas of universalism, which claimed to be for all, but usually worked only for a few.⁸ From this perspective, universality is not the biggest common denominator. It is not a generalization of everything. There is no general ordering position or definition. This kind of universality is not strategic, but strange. Why? Seen scientifically, the universe is a strange and vastly unknown entity with many different interlocking dimensions. It potentially consists of strange matter, wormholes, and complex n-dimensional non-euclidian spaces, in which terms like “grid,” “immanence,” “territory,” and “exclusion” dramatically change or even lose their meaning.

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Strange universalism is something both more and less than general, both below and beyond the realm of forms. Under current conditions, it cannot fully grasp let alone own itself. It does not refer to a “whole” or a totality, but to something smaller than its parts,⁹ each one potentially exceeding it in detail and complexity. Anyone younger than nine years old knows that a couple of universes easily fit into a pocket.

This is the Universe

Seen from this perspective, *The Black Square* cancels the blank horror of the white canvas as a seemingly neutral and objective ground. It resolutely replaces its bleak tabula rasa with a fragment of the cosmos. *The Black Square* is neither ground nor figure, neither background nor projection screen. It is a base without a superstructure, full of hidden undercurrents shining forth through its cracks.¹⁰ Seen as just space, *The Black Square* is both fully documentary and completely encrypted, both abstract and indexical. It shows absence as link.¹¹

The Black Square is not the same as it was one hundred years ago, even materially.¹² It's meanings have been amplified through its own



Pucker up! A protester in Macedonia weaponizes lipstick. Photo: Biljana Ginova & Jasmina Golubovska.

aging and history, even if Malevich *most definitely* didn't intend any of it. What if one chose *now* to see the network of its cracked and decaying paint as anticipating the recent detection of filaments of so-called dark matter – a web connecting distant galaxies?¹³ What other meanings will the painting lend itself to in another hundred years?

But all this avoids the question: What is *The Black Square's* equivalent in the age of Reality TV?

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Deliveroo servers' downtime, January 2017. This image was originally used to illustrate the text "Far From Seamless: a Workers' Inquiry at Deliveroo" by authors Facility Waters and Jamie Woodcock, see <https://www.viewpointmag.com/2017/09/20/far-seamless-workers-inquiry-deliveroo/>.

The answer is very simple: today, *The Black Square* could be anywhere. It is potentially ubiquitous. It has pervaded reality without anyone noticing. It has gone viral like a 3-D meme. Today, *The Black Square* is any TV or phone screen that is switched off. *The Black Square* has become The Black Screen.

Whatever is shown on screens today is mostly numbers posing as people. In contrast, The Black Screen does not present media realisms, but rather the reality of mediation. It doesn't show Reality TV, but demonstrates that proliferating screens are real. The black surface of the screen could be the exterior of the black-box algorithms operating behind it. In this case, The Black Screen becomes a documentary image of real-existing technology and its nontransparent mode of operation. *The Black Square's* white frame is replaced by a slim metal frame bearing the name of a corporation. This is the new normal, the standard blank page or

canvas.

But one could also turn the table once again. The Black Screen thus becomes a platform *under* which people move undetected and undeterred. It is not like Uber, but like *unter*, not used from above but from below. In a grid made of these kinds of Black Screens, every single square would point to the universe, and nothing but the universe. This grid might be the negative version of corporate and populist identity management, which classifies, ranks, and rates. If platforms turn tables against people, one could also turn the platforms: in this case, upside down.

So close your eyes a little, squint a bit: through the dark screen, the universe looks back at you.

x

Author's note: This is a draft for a future text and thus it does not yet contain the full credits and references. For the moment let me refer to Wendy Chun, Boris Groys, Helen Kaplinsky, Trevor Paglen, Stephen Squibb, David Riff, Fred Moten, and Stefano Harney – this list is far from complete.

1
Sorry Ukrainian hackers! In this case you are performing a social service for people, such as US farmers who are not allowed to repair their own tractors because the software remains the property of a corporation.

2
Table-turning – that parlor trick whereby spiritualist performers made ghosts dance for a select few – is Marx's metaphor for the commodity. Thank you to Stephen Squibb for this reference.

3
Of course, this is a complete oversimplification. People have agency. But what exactly moves people today, and *how* it makes them move, is difficult to assess in a world where platforms manipulate social affect through fake rage, perception management, and permanent disruption. By "platforms" I mean primarily social media, but this could also come to mean any kind of decentralized autonomous organization (DAO), smart contract, or coin scheme on a blockchain or high-definition digital-address system. A great example is described in Facility Waters and Jamie Woodcock's text "Far From Seamless: a Workers' Inquiry at Deliveroo" See <https://www.viewpointmag.com/2017/09/20/far-seamless-workers-inquiry-deliveroo/>

4
Littlefinger meets Aleksandr Dugin.

5
Of course they do. They also recall earlier systems of this kind, taking us back to the time of radio-instigated ethnic cleansing, printing-press disseminated anti-Semitism, and IBM/Hollerith-enabled deportation lists.

6
Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964), 245.

7
This was an argument advanced by the show "Art Without Death: Russian Cosmism," curated by Anton Vidokle and Boris Groys at HKW earlier this year. See also Groys's text in this issue. There is no indication that Malevich intended *The Black Square* to show outer space, except for abundant references to the cosmos throughout his work. Yet, reading a seeming abstraction as a portrait is encouraged by the red square of his *Painterly Realism of a Peasant Woman in Two Dimensions*.

8
This point requires a lengthy explanation, which I will need to provide in a longer version of this piece to be written in the future. But the point is partly addressed in Boris Buden conversation with

Darko Suvin in this issue.

9
Thanks to Tim Morton for making this clear to me and for pointing me to "On Black Negativity, Or the Affirmation of Nothing: Jared Sexton, interviewed by Daniel Colucciello Barber," see <http://societyandspace.org/2017/09/18/on-black-negativity-or-the-affirmation-of-nothing/>.

10
See Stefano Harney and Fred Moten's piece in this issue.

11
See also <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/79/94158/all-black-everything/>

12
I am referring to the claim by Russian's State Tretyakov Gallery, where *The Black Square* is housed, that the white border of the painting bears the traces of an erased racist graffiti. There are different opinions as to who scrawled it, but regardless, in my view this is what the white frame in this composition is all about. See Aleksandra Shatskikh, "Inscribed Vandalism: *The Black Square* at One Hundred," *e-flux journal* 85 (October 2017) <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/85/155475/inscribed-vandalism-the-black-square-at-one-hundred/>.

13
See "Researchers capture first 'image' of a dark matter web that connects galaxies," *phys.org*, April 12, 2017 <https://phys.org/news/2017-04-capture-image-dark-web-galaxies.html>.

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