A Study of Relationships between Distraction, Ubiquitous Computing, and Art Practice

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Abstract

In this report, I first outline the aims and objectives of my study, which are to explore the phenomenon of distraction in relation to mobile digital communications and ubiquitous computing through an experimental, reflective art practice. This will generate a body of artwork that will form a practical inquiry into these distractions and the online practices that take place through them.

I then discuss the rationale behind my study as developing from earlier work that focused on solitude and landscape in relation to technological acceleration: my research sets out to explore the question of what a critical art practice could be in response to the experiential phenomena invoked by ubiquitous computing. Since the relevant contextual terrain is cross-disciplinary, my literature and practice review is organised thematically around a number of threads emerging from my engagement with the literature, namely power and user agency; productivity and work; quantification; and quasi-materiality.

I begin my review with a discussion of writing on distraction and technology that dominates public discourse on the topic. I critique Turkle's argument in *Alone Together*[1] with recourse to Jurgenson's idea of 'digital dualism'.[2] Turkle is criticised here for her failure to acknowledge the blended offline/online modalities of technologically mediated communication. I continue with a critical appraisal of Carr's more determinist accounts of communication technologies,[3] concluding this section with a discussion of the more nuanced positions held by Norman in design theory,[4] and Crawford[5] and Light[6] in the Social Media Studies field. Harvey's *CVDazzle* is mentioned as an example of work that uses the affordances of a system of surveillance against itself.[7] I then go on to discuss the

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1 Sherry Turkle, Alone Together: Why We Expect More From Technology and Less From Each Other (New York: Basic Books, 2012).
2 Nathan Jurgenson, 'The IRL Fetish', *The New Inquiry*, 2012 <http://thenewinquiry.com/essays/the-irl-fetish/> [accessed 6 November 2015].
3 Nicholas Carr, *The Shallows: How the Internet Is Changing The Way We Think, Read and Remember* (London: Atlantic Books, 2011).
4 Donald A Norman, *The Design of Everyday Things* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2013).
5 Kate Crawford, 'Following You: Disciplines of Listening in Social Media', *Continuum*, 23.4 (2009), 525–35 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10304310903003270>.
6 Ben Light, *Disconnecting with Social Networking Sites* (Palgrave Macmillan M.U.A) <https://www.dawsonera.com/abstract/9781137022479> [accessed 6 November 2015].
7 Adam Harvey, 'CV Dazzle: Camouflage from Face Detection' <http://cvdazzle.com/> [accessed 6 November 2015].

pathologisation of distraction, and how Crary frames this in relation to the needs of industrialised labour.[8] I invoke Brown's conception of neoliberalism as a governing rationality here, and this extends my argument to include practices of quantification that are conducted using Internet-enabled technologies.[9] Using examples of artwork by Grosser,[10] McDonald & McCarthy,[11] and reflecting on my own research, I discuss how practices of data-gathering and self-monitoring combine to frame the self as a site for the accumulation of value, and how attentiveness is a characteristic that contributes to the self-actualised value of the neoliberal self. I then discuss the materiality of the devices through which external distractions are experienced, critiquing 'post-internet' art practice and arguing for the usefulness of the term 'quasi-material' in relation to the work of Soulellis[12] and my own practical research.

I then explore the methodological questions emerging from practice-as-research in art, and propose that art's capacity to de-familiarise might be an important part of its potential as a research activity. The contribution to knowledge I intend to generate is then described as a substantial insight brought into being through the production and analysis of artworks produced through a critical and reflective art practice, in line with Nelson's PaR model.[13]

In conclusion, I briefly outline the future trajectory of my practical research as aiming to intervene in the circumstance of interaction rather than to merely represent it. (499 words)

[8] Jonathan Crary, *Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle, and Modern Culture*, 1st edn (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2001).

[9] Timothy Shenk, 'Booked #3: What Exactly Is Neoliberalism?', *Dissent Magazine* <https://www.dissentmagazine.org/blog/booked-3-what-exactly-is-neoliberalism-wendy-brown-undoing-the-demos> [accessed 6 November 2015].

[10] Benjamin Grosser, *Facebook Demetricator | Benjamin Grosser*, present 2012 <http://bengrosser.com/projects/facebook-demetricator/> [accessed 6 November 2015].

[11] Lauren McCarthy and Kyle McDonald, *Pplkpr*, 2015 <http://pplkpr.com/> [accessed 6 November 2015].

[12] Paul Soulellis, 'Performing Publishing: Infrathin Tales from the Printed Web', *Hyperallergic* <http://hyperallergic.com/165803/performing-publishing-infrathin-tales-from-the-printed-web/> [accessed 6 November 2015].

[13] Robin Nelson, *Practice as Research in the Arts: Principles, Protocols, Pedagogies, Resistances* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

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