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CATHERINE D'IGNAZIO

Research Affiliate

Catherine D'Ignazio is the person behind that really cute baby. She is an Assistant Professor of Data Visualization and Civic Media at Emerson College who investigates how data visualization, technology and new forms of storytelling can be used for civic engagement.

Professor D'Ignazio has conducted research on geographic bias in the news media, developed custom software to geolocate news articles and designed an application, "Terra Incognita", to promote global news discovery. She is working on sensor journalism around water quality with PublicLab, data literacy projects and various community-educational partnerships with her journalism students. Notably, she co-organized a hackathon at the MIT Media Lab called "The Make the Breast Pump Not Suck!" Hackathon.

Her art and design projects have won awards from the Tanne Foundation, Turbulence.org, the LEF Foundation, and Dream It, Code It, Win It. In 2009, she was a finalist for the Foster Prize at the ICA Boston. Her work has been exhibited at the Eyebeam Center for Art & Technology, Museo d'Antiochia of Medellin, and the Venice Biennial.

Professor D'Ignazio is a Fellow at the Emerson Engagement Lab and a

RECLAIMING PUBLIC SPACE/SURVEILLANCE AND CONTROL

Submitted by [kanarinka](#) on April 20, 2014 - 2:52pm



WARNING: PERCEPTION REQUIRES INVOLVEMENT. By Antoni Muntadas, 2012. Presented at the Pavement Gallery.

This weekend I moderated a panel for [Public Space: Lost & Found](#), a symposium in honor of the work of Antoni Muntadas who has taught in the Art, Culture and Technology program at MIT for more than thirty years. Here is my introduction of our panel and its issues, along with some of the questions I had for the panelists at the end. If I can track it down, I will try to post the full video from the event because the speakers and respondents on the panel were amazing.

Hello everyone. My name is Catherine D'Ignazio and I'm a research assistant at the MIT Center for Civic Media. I can't express what an honor it is to be here and to be sharing a stage with three of my heroes so a thank you to Gedminas Urbonas for organizing this symposium and Muntadas for his amazing work and teaching which give us a reason to be here today.

Research Affiliate at (and alumna of)
the MIT Center for Civic Media.

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Our panel is called *Reclaiming Public Space/Surveillance and Control*. While public space was imagined by some to be in decline over the past half century, the developments of the past several years show that from Tahrir Square to Zucotti Park to Gezi Park to Plaza Altamira the act of physically gathering in public spaces to express dissent and posit alternate futures is alive and well. While we might not go so far as to brand these "Twitter Revolutions" it is undoubtable that media - social, networked, mobile, participatory - are playing an important role in organizing, documenting and disseminating these gatherings. To use television language, there are many, many channels now. So when CNN Turk is showing a penguin documentary while thousands of protestors are being tear gassed in Istanbul, [the world finds out](#) via text, Twitter, YouTube, memes, gifs and blogs.

But the proliferation of media forms doesn't lead directly to liberation. What is also alive and well from an economic perspective is the booming business of surveillance. In an era where computer storage is cheap, data can be big. General Keith Alexander, Director of the National Security Agency, articulated the general cultural ethos of Big Data when he said, "You need the haystack to find the needle." In other words, "Collect and store everything." This is the philosophy behind [the NSA contracting with our media companies](#) (who were already surveiling us, in any case) to access our metadata, to tap the phones of friendly foreign leaders, and so on. And in fact, the discourse of Big Data is particularly interesting for artists and cultural producers of all kinds. Because Big Data makes claims to visibility. The discourse is about exposing hidden patterns, making the invisible visible, and revealing meaning from the chaos of everyday life. This is something that artists often claim to do. And novel technologies for the purposes of spatial data collection are proliferating. For example, in just the past week I've learned about a technology called [ShotSpotter](#) used in the City of Oakland which places receivers across the city that immediately alert law enforcement to the location of gunfire. Because relations between the community and the police are strained and people do not report crimes, so now ShotSpotter does. And another one called [Stingray technology](#) which simulates a cell phone tower, convinces mobile phones within a certain radius to connect to it, and then accesses all manner of mobile data. This is evidently being used to collect information from protesters' mobile phones among other things.

My point is simply that surveillance is pervasive, surveillance is data-based and surveillance is unequal. It is unequal in relation to who has the resources to own, analyze and mobilize the Big Datas and the Smart Cities and it is unequal in terms of who it targets, disproportionately targeting social movement leaders, people of color, of lower income, and with marginalized status in society.

So what we might do at this point is sit around and feel depressed.

Except that what we have today is an amazing opportunity to have in front of us three guides who, in their various ways, show us how to reclaim public space. But, perhaps more importantly, they show us how to reclaim our agency as civic actors. They know that shaping public space is not just about designing a building but about contesting and re-formulating social relationships to place.

Where surveillance is from above, these artists work from below - with specific communities in crisis or stressed situations. Where surveillance is predicated on division and distance, these artists work with proximity and intimacy. One of the things that I most admire about the speakers on our panel today is the ways in which their work travels outside of realm of art to become other most urgent and pressing things: like [a public toilet](#), for example, or [a civic institution](#) or [a prosthetic device](#). Their distinguished careers have led them to bold ideas like the Abolition of War, on-site classes like Design for the Living World and cross-border laboratories like [the Center for Urban Ecologies](#). And like Muntadas, and I think this is very important to note and to say, they are educators.

I will now briefly introduce our speakers individually and note that their accomplishments and awards are too numerous to fit here so I'm not even going to try. For example, like Muntadas, they have all represented their countries at the Venice Biennial, normally considered one of Art and Architecture's highest awards.

[Teddy Cruz](#) is an architect known internationally for his urban research on the Tijuana/San Diego border, advancing border neighborhoods as sites of cultural production from which to rethink urban

policy, affordable housing, and civic infrastructure. Teddy is a professor in public culture and urbanism at University of California, San Diego, where he is founding co-director of the Center for Urban Ecologies and several other civic initiatives. He is also a special advisor to the City of San Diego.

[Marjetica Potrc](#) is an artist and architect. She is a professor at the University of Fine Arts in Hamburg, Germany. Her drawings, architecture and participatory design works have been exhibited extensively throughout Europe and the Americas. Originally from Slovenia, she works internationally in sites such as Caracas, Soweto and Amsterdam.

[Krzysztof Wodiczko](#) is an artist, theorist and educator, Professor in Residence of Art, Design, and the Public Domain at the GSD, Harvard, and a former director of the Center for Advanced Visual Studies, at MIT. He is renowned for his large-scale slide and video projections on architectural facades and monuments. He has worked with immigrants, veterans, and homeless city residents to develop interrogative design objects and stories.

Additionally, today we have two esteemed colleagues who are respondents to our panelists. Like our panelists they are also really amazing people with many accomplishments.

[Jane Hutton](#) is a landscape architect and assistant professor at the Harvard Graduate School of Design. Her research focuses on the expanded consequences of material practice in landscape architecture, examining links between the landscapes of production and consumption of common construction materials. Current research projects include the geographic tracing of construction materials used in public landscapes of New York City.

[Adrian Blackwell](#) is an artist and urbanist whose work focuses on the relation between physical spaces and political and economic forces. His research focuses on the intertwined problems of public space and private property. His current writing examines the polarities of global neoliberal urbanization using Shenzhen as its case. He is an assistant professor at the University of Waterloo, a visiting professor at Harvard's Graduate School of Design.

Please join me in welcoming our esteemed guests. Teddy Cruz will give the first presentation.

Questions for the Panel

- All of your work involves participation in some way. Teddy spoke about "protocols of participation" and Marjetica laid out her rules of engagement. Could you all speak more about participation, the rules that govern your engagement with communities, and how you came to learn or create these protocols? And what role does conflict, dissent or contestation play?
- Echoing Marjetica's question at the end of her presentation - How do we scale participatory, bottom-up innovation to effect change on a legislative scale?
- Teddy and Krzysztof spoke about visualizations and "making visible". Krzysztof mentioned that Hannah Arendt equates visibility with equality. Marjetica speaks about creating visible public spaces for a community. But visibility is not just unequivocally good, as we see in the case of surveillance. What about this tension that exists between control, domination and visibility? Does scale matter here?

