

Surreptitious Networks: Protection, Parsing, and Praxis
Peter Merrington

The Surreptitious Network workshop was structured around a series of artist presentations and group discussions. Pitched as a dialogue on artistic production networks, the workshop was essentially focused on the network as a site of power and control. Artists Graham Harwood, Lise Autogena, Joanna Griffin and Isabella Streffen presented their work and led discussions around the emergent questions on artistic research, discursive and enquiry-based practice, the boundaries of the visible and invisible and praxis.

All of the artists' projects, in different ways, have some relationship with notions of protection, where the network brings order out of complexity and acts as a form of security or control in society. I would like to use this space to reflect on these and to discuss the relationship between the network, protection and security through these artistic enquiries.

To begin, I think it is necessary to explore a little, what could be meant by the term *surreptitious network*. In the preface to *The Order of Things*, Michel Foucault writes...

"Order is, at one and the same time, that which is given in things as their inner law, the hidden network that determines the way they confront one another, and also that which has no existence except in the grid created by a glance, an examination, a language; and it is only in the blank spaces of this grid that order manifests itself in depth as though already there, waiting in silence for the moment of its expression."ⁱ

In following Foucault we find a hidden network is present in all sets of relations, where the complexity of the normal masks this order, hides the networks and the relations that form it. Our attempts at order are constantly present in the structures around us, in the immune system of our environment (as Peter

Sloterdijk might call it), in architecture, symbols, landscape and territorial boundaries. At the basis of the built environment is a control of space that is necessary for protection: a need to create an order that sustains us and allows us to sleep soundly at night. We use walls, doors and roofs as a protective force from the dangers of nature and the extremes of weather, but we also increasingly situate our protection in information, in data, in the seemingly protective forces of statistical intelligence and the knowledge that it provides. The desire for safety and protection through this knowledge drives the way information is controlled and permitted to act: the network is essentially about order, the governance of flows of information, control and power.

All four of these artists examine the boundaries between visible and invisible network, and the power structures at play within these territories as means of understanding how technical objects are deployed for our protection. By its very nature a network is in some way hidden, invisible, or incomprehensible, it is a specific technology of power, organisation and control. As such, we can say that all networks are in some way surreptitious, they go unseen in their sum: the network is not a text that can be easily read. At the same time, the term 'surreptitious' implies invisibility as a conscious act, or ethically dubious function – it implies conspiracy.

An artistic investigation into a surreptitious network – that which functions, acts, impinges but simultaneously is maligned, invisible or out of sight – is both an attempt to vision and at the same time revision our world. Viewed from the node or the outside, networks are surreptitious because they cannot be seen. The clandestine military network is the preeminent example: it relies on its inability to be made visible so no empirical meaning can be established from outside. This is evident in the work of geographer and artist, Trevor Paglenⁱⁱ whose series of photographs of restricted military bases, provide only the slightest possible sight of the material of their operation – this is all we can know of these networks, places and people, the distant and incomplete. The same questions are present in Joanna Griffin's and Isabella Streffen's work. Griffin attempts to vision, to make visible the unknowable networks of submarines and

satellites that constantly flow around the planet. Similarly, Streffen's new project *Dronology*ⁱⁱⁱ is an attempt to gather information, images, text, accounts and ways of seeing the drone and its contemporary application in warfare and beyond. What such projects allow is the possibility of imaginative and critical interpretation of technologies that are increasingly invisible, hidden and maligned.

If the encounters of Streffen and Griffin are creative attempts to engage with the physical, the 'out there somewhere', the unknowable, unseeable networks of military technology, then Lise Autogena's work intersects with the concrete reality of protective forces and the networks that compose them. Her long-term project with acoustic sound mirrors across the English Channel is an investigation into these protective devices, designed as a way of aurally placing the enemy in space, of making them visible as a form of notification, a parsing of space and sound^{iv}. These giant parabolas operated as a network of listening devices, a connected military system that was used between the two world wars to seek out potential threats. As an artistic enquiry and site of research the sound mirrors also acted within the complexities of territorial politics and international dialogue. Autogena was subject to various political agendas and obstacles in negotiating across the international boundary between French and British space in her attempt to join two new sound mirrors in dialogue across the channel.

Autogena's recent project *Foghorn Requiem*^v, works again with the materiality of protective forces. *Foghorn Requiem* is a musical performance to mark the disappearance of the foghorn from the UK's coastal landscape. The sounding of the foghorn is an audible warning that defines danger, a boundary line or cliff edge. For those at sea, this edge is an anonymous site beyond the vision of human perception and experience; it requires a protective device to reach into the disorder of unknown space beyond the boundary, to vision it through sound, and to place the listener in relation to the danger. It ultimately seeks to protect those on the outside of the boundary from the risks of the impermeable and the invisible, from that which is made dangerous through lack of sight – the unknown rocks under a turbulent sea or a blackening, nullifying fog. With both the sound mirrors and the foghorn, it the aural that cuts through the

invisible, the horn and ear together allow sailors and soldiers to better effect their own preservation. However, the sound mirrors and the foghorn are outmoded and obsolete: they are only to be heard in requiem, replaced by new forces, objects that are built on information, lacking in the aural but equally built on the need to vision what is out of sight. GPS mapping will now tell a ship its location, a network of data and parsing (the process of analysis of data based on a given set of rules) generates a new protective force that keeps vessels away from dangerous boundaries. In a sense, we have moved from protective networks of looking into the invisible through an extension of our senses, sight and hearing, to a new form of protective looking conducted by machines on our behalf, as Sloterdijk^{vi} writes, "the body of humanity seeks to create a new immune constitution in an electronic medial skin", the database is now a protective force in society; we hold it up as a means of immunity, as a form of protection.

Graham Harwood's work is built on an enquiry into the practices and exercises of power through language and these databases as technical objects. His recent project (working as the collective, YoHa^{vii}) *Invisible Airs* sought to question the popular notion of 'transparency' in local governance. This turn to transparency could be read as the deployment of a form of immunity, where the database acts as a protective force, supposedly safeguarding those who are governed from the excesses and abuses of those in power by making visible their activity in the form of 'open' data. *Invisible Airs* was an investigation into the expenditure database of Bristol City Council; it explored these issues, as YoHa writes:

"Power, Governance and Data has been conducting a naked love dance on this island since before the Domesday book, it's rhythms have quickened of late, multiplied and become amplified through database machines. New abstractions that order and compare the world are spawning new technologies of power out of the orgiastic revelry of a bookkeeping gone mad."^{viii}

Yoha began their investigation by trying to read 20,000 comma-separated lines of so-called *open data* that the council released. Containing the council's expenditure information, this was ultimately a futile task that revealed almost nothing other than the boredom associated with enacting it. You cannot read a database in any traditional sense: the way these texts are read and made visible is through cybernetic parsing – scanning, rearranging, filtering and interpolating—through a process that gives it some value, volume or atmosphere. For Yoha's version of parsing, they built five machines, technical objects or contraptions that in some way sought to speak to those affected by the data. These were an expenditure filled spud gun, an open data book stabber, a floor polisher, a pneumatic brusher and an expenditure-riding machine. The machines created a pneumatic volume of air pressure that corresponded to the value of an expenditure item, and this was mechanically translated into some form of action. These amusing contraptions were given over to members of the public and councilors to stab, ride and shoot, as a means to create conversations and dialogue about the database and question notions of openness and transparency.

Harwood argues the database is a theoretical machine: an enterprise that performs some undertaking, possessing vitality through which it operates back onto society. This asks a number of questions of the post-human – how do we participate with the database? What is the relation of the creator, the host and the user? What Harwood does is put theory to work in a nuanced echo of McKenzie Wark's description of the Situationist International^{ix}. This process is not interested in the data itself but asks how the data is constructed, how it is created in the mundane, the everyday, how it is part of the operation of the everyday contemporary condition. The questions become: who enters the information, what is their role, what file format is used, where is their desk located, who else is in the office? Here, power is hidden by the veil of simplicity –what YoHa sets out to do is to pick apart the assemblages of this order to show its complexity and in the process reveal the workings of the power at play.

Through the artistic enquires of Graham Harwood, Lise Autogena, Joanna

Griffin and Isabella Streffen it is possible to trace the (in)visible operation of networks and the changing nature of our relationship with these technical objects as sites of protection from the military network of suspicion, to the obsolete aural technologies of border safety, and our contemporary reliance on parsing the database as a means of looking for safety, security and the maintenance or replication of power structures.

The artistic examination of surreptitious networks is about paying attention to infrastructure and logistics and how power works through them; about paying attention to the systemic edges; about where the ruptures happen and where these forces break forth to become visible, tangible, knowable and affective. Here we can see the surreptitious network as essentially a form of masked complexity or hidden disorder that operates ruthlessly and effectively on a mundane scale. The most surreptitious networks of all are those that hide without apparent intent, those that masquerade as normal, those that appear *natural*. The structures, forces and linguistics of society hide because they are so powerful^x. Words and concepts like 'immigration', 'population', 'regeneration' and policy buzzwords like 'transparency' and 'the creative' conceal these types of insidious networks. We need to ask what is hidden within these big concepts that so dominates the contemporary? This is where complexity becomes banality and goes unseen. The potential of artistic research practice in relation to these notions is as a way of seeing, a way of critically visioning that which might otherwise go unknown or unattended, to make audible a silence.

ⁱ Foucault, M. (2002) *The order of things : an archaeology of the human sciences*. London: Routledge, pxx

ⁱⁱ See <http://www.paglen.com/>

ⁱⁱⁱ See <http://dronology.com/>

^{iv} See <http://www.soundmirrors.org/>

^v See <http://foghornrequiem.org/>

^{vi} Sloterdijk, P. (2011) *Bubbles : microspherology*. Los Angeles, CA: Semiotext(e), p25

^{vii} YoHa is a collective made up of Graham Harwood and Matsuko Yokokoji, *Invisible Airs* was assisted by Stephen Fortune

^{viii} <http://yoha.co.uk/invisible>

^{ix} See <http://stirtoaction.com/interview-with-mckenzie-wark/>

^x Sassen, S (23/02/2013) *In the Shadows of Powerful Systems* Sonic Acts Conference presentation

Surreptitious Networks

Peter J. Evans

Preamble, zero point, paratexts or simply context

It's a Friday afternoon and I'm finally sat at my desk, having been thinking of where this piece of writing might go for the last few weeks. To my left is an open brown folder with four coloured pieces of paper, each jotted with notes from the distinct, artist-led, afternoon sessions that formed half of the Surreptitious Networks event. A notebook flipped open to the correct page presents – in graphite – more recorded information, whilst my plan of approach to this linguistic outpouring is concealed by a hot chocolate stain on the back of an envelope.

Music plays and I start.

The setup

The preamble is not meant to take up word count, but instead to provide a glimpse of the network of information that has led me here, to this place of writing about networks both surreptitious and solid, which I suggest are really equal and matched forces.

Networks are both essential and problematic: essential for communication, social cohesion and commerce; problematic in those same areas. I would like to think that artists exist somehow outside of this, but in reality we're just as involved as anyone else, there is simply a different set of rules to play by (as in every unique network).

On the day of the Surreptitious Network event, we discussed the network of the database - "the grey zone of bureaucratic excel spreadsheets"; the cultural differences of network functionality (meetings with tea and biscuits, or with dinner and wine); the outsider within a specialised system; parasitic networks, and pollinators. There was plenty to talk and think about, so what else can I add? It occurs to me that the main distinctions in any given network are two fold: firstly the unique contextual situation of the network; and secondly, the individual movements within the network.

Recently within the artistic field, *network* has almost become a dirty word – the idea of *networking* has been tied to the act of pushing or selling oneself in a manner that fails to sit comfortably with the schematic of artistic integrity, even though holding such a position places us within another network constructed from individuals holding that view. Networks are drawn as spider webs not just for the ease of viewing the data. We're placed in them regardless of our wants – either viewing their lines as connections or as boundaries, dependent on our position in relation to what the network represents.

Territory, overlays and underlays

Networks are by their very nature a system of axes, with the simplest network operating between two points, a conversation, a movement of messages backwards and forwards. In one viewpoint, any exchange can be seen as an operating and functional network. This way of seeing might be described as one of *classification* in which we are able to examine both the *ends* of the axis and the interaction occurring. Almost inevitably, each *end* will be connected to a wealth of other networks laid over and under this basic transaction, rendering a classification more problematic. This leads to a second view of network positions, summarised succinctly in the linear notes to *A Word of Science: The First and Final Chapter*¹ "the only thing you find in pigeon boxes is pigeon shit". In this polemic the network becomes a system of the establishment – which is to be fought against – or at least the rules of the prevailing networks. With both positions in mind, it becomes clear that

the defining factor of one's relationship to any network is the contextual background held by both it and you –where the similarities are, and where the differences lie.

So what can we consider to be a surreptitious network in this landscape? Possibly any network we're not a part of, or which functions outside of our norms. Certainly, the way a network operates feels secretive and clandestine to anyone outside of it. A good example of this would be to compare REF outputs in academia and music classifications in vinyl record stores. If you are in academia in the UK, you'll be well aware of what a REF'able output is, what constitutes a strong or high rating output, and what points are key to a good score in 300 words. For those outside that system, it all appears fairly cryptic. Recently, on getting through to a second round for an academic post I was asked to provide three REF'able outputs. What the REF is, how the *outputs* are constructed, and any other information was left out because my application for such a post meant I must be *de facto* part of the academic network and understand these meanings. In the record store example, a new record of electronic music arrives and needs to be classified. The staff member will know whether it goes into techno or electro, ambient or Balearic house, Detroit or Chicago and so on, based on their knowledge of how the store owner defines each category. But if someone who is not aware of this specific categorization has heard the record and comes in to find it, where do they start looking when nothing is alphabetical?

The actuality is even blurrier. There is no inside or outside of networks, just different constructions of the networks (or the rules of databases which construct institutional networks). The individual is embedded at various depths, dependent on their individual lexicon. The question to be asked then, in connection to any network, is how far you go along with the rules constructed, either socially or via a real database within that network? This brings us neatly back to 1: the network, 2: your movements within it and 3: the midwives.

End - the beginning

Midwives came up in conversation during the day as an example of how a rigorous database system - both in terms of the medicalisation of the condition of pregnancy and attaching those not yet born into the bureaucratic systems of the society - is made more human and malleable by those individuals who inhabit that particular network. Midwives understand how to manipulate their system into what they and the women that they care for need it to be (of course some are better at this than others). The possibility is there to be used, the rules and boundaries pushed against and explored, for the benefit of those involved. Each individual midwife's decisions about how to move through the system will be influenced by the other networks they participate in: the links between systems are there and manifest, though they might sit surreptitiously beneath the surface. The definition of a surreptitious network might also be two-fold: the procedural and the boundary-pushing. The procedural network exists where the database system for that network is continually evolving dependent on the individuals forming the network in what we might call a relational network as opposed to one formed out of bureaucracy. The second fold comprises the movements of those who push the boundaries of such procedural networks, who push at systems which aren't supposed to go any further than what's provided in the box or within the lines. And yet we all know there is always the moment under the moment, the push against the boundary lines and the collisions between networks are the unique contextual position of each individual - separate but still connected - little pieces in an ever-expanding mosaic.

ⁱ The first album by Nightmares on Wax, released by Warp records in 1991.

Surreptitious Networks

Catherine Spencer

i: Network vs. System

While collaborative exchange has often been an integral part of creative production, during the 1960s the notion of the art world as a network took particular hold, forged in the white heat of the fusion between structuralism, systems theory, cybernetics and new communications technologies. US artists and critics in particular embraced the writings of Norbert Wiener, Marshall McLuhan and Claude Lévi-Strauss to conceptualise artistic interrelation in an increasingly globalised world. This passion for connectivity resulted in an efflorescence of critical essays with titles like 'Systems Aesthetics' (Jack Burnham, 1968), and 'Network: The Art World Described as a System' (Lawrence Alloway, 1972), together with major shows such as Kynaston McShine's 1970 *Information* exhibition at the New York Museum of Modern Art.

Yet the network's premise is equally freighted with complexity and anxiety – from surveillance scandals, to the web's information overload, and the chill sweat that the prospect of 'networking' at conferences and events can inspire. Although the network continues to provide not only a hugely productive but vitally necessary model for thinking about artistic production, the companion notion of the 'system', with its connotations of sleek functionality, has fallen dramatically from favour. The relationships unearthed during the Surreptitious Networks workshop, as its title infers, were provisional, messy and haphazard, lying partially submerged like island archipelagos. Connections are important, vital and nourishing for artistic creation – and indeed, sometimes constitute the work of art – but the demand to re-think the ambivalent word 'network', or at least to consider the diverse multiplicity of interactions (enabling and obstructive, the dead end as well as the node) encompassed by the term, recurred throughout the work of each artist who participated.

ii: Database

Throughout 2011, under the aegis of his collaborative partnership YoHa, Graham Harwood worked on the project *Invisible Air – Database, Expenditure, Power* with the University of the West of England and Bristol City Council. Harwood was fascinated by the council's baroque database systems, through which information about citizens paradoxically became visible and yet lost to view, because only certain people could navigate the intractable spread-sheet morass. For Harwood, as for other UK-based artists such as Stephen Willats, the database 'has become an active mediator in its own right'. Information controls us as much as we control it: the relationship is reciprocal.

Through *Invisible Air*, Harwood attempted to give this reciprocity tangible form by devising machines reminiscent of Jean Tinguely's *Metamatics*. Game punters could, for example, 'ride the public expenditure' by sitting on a

contraption whose movements were ordained by dataflows excavated from council records. For all their Heath Robinson whimsicality, these creations vividly embody the interconnection of information infrastructure with lived experience – it might be enjoyable at times, useful at others, but it ultimately controls and co-ordinates much of what we do.

iii: Transaction

Like Harwood, Lise Autogena's work emerges from long periods of sleuthing through records and archives. Autogena's *Sound Mirrors Project*, which began in 1998, remains in a state of networked potential: her utopic aspiration to recreate acoustic mirrors on either side of the channel – a defence system developed between the wars to enable surveillance of the sky – has yet to be realised. In the process, a system originally elaborated for military purposes has been re-tooled as a means of *recherche* communication, which various bureaucratic and institutional organisations have in turn conspired to disrupt.

The capacity of networks to constrict rather than facilitate became particularly apparent during Autogena's installation of the *Black Shoals: Stock Market Planetarium* project at Tate in 2008, which mapped stock market data as constellations swarming over the night sky. The Tate became anxious about the potential sensitivity of the information, and so asked that the corporate stars and galaxies not be named. As a result of the incomplete nature of this network, and the unfinished status of *Sound Mirrors Project*, Autogena is acutely aware of the vast amount of material that she hasn't 'really done anything with yet', and of the difficulty in bringing certain exchanges invoked in a work's creation to light, however committed the artist might be to the premise of interconnection.

iv: Satellite

Joanna Griffin is similarly attuned to the invisibility of certain networks, having managed to infiltrate several of the nexus points in various global defence systems, including the Mullard Space Science Laboratory in the UK and the NASA Space Science Lab at Berkeley. Just as we might only be partially aware of the workings of satellites and submarines, Griffin stresses that audiences often see only 'a tiny little portion' of the support apparatus on which the most visible element of any given artwork rests.

In an attempt to counter this, Griffin encourages her participants to fabricate their own connections and assemblages, exemplified by her large-scale astronomy festival project in Bangalore during which people created low-fi satellite maps on the ground from rocks, chalk, and scribbled drawings. Griffin's practice feels very much concerned with living, breathing organisms rather than networks – organisms constituted from constantly changing narratives, whispered stories, fairy tales, children's drawings, and most importantly, questions (questions which don't always make sense). The satellite may belong to a missile defence system, but it is also comet, vision, and miracle, even perhaps a vehicle for occult messages.

v: Drone

Griffin's conviction that 'the idea of the satellite is very much about looking back' converges with Isabella Streffen's interest in meeting the gaze of a particularly controversial contemporary viewing technology: the drone. Streffen's current project, *Dronology*, effectively plays the drones at their own game, tagging and coalescing the information circulating about them online onto one website. By performing its own act of stealth tracking, *Dronology* self-consciously enacts the continual pull between criticism and complicity at play whenever an artist enters in on an established set of community practices.

Yet *Dronology* flags the way out of this double bind by showcasing the creative possibilities of connections made through research. These connections are tangential, recursive, and repetitions, occupying a space at the interface of the personal and the collective. Like Harwood, Griffin and Autogena, Streffen is fascinated by the way in which technologies emerge through a combination of continual invention and obsolescence, so that some parts of the network still function while others wilt and decay, providing space for fruitful, imaginative intervention.

vi: Net/work

This essay is a fabrication – a fragment that should be read metonymically as a remnant of a larger whole. Some of the words definitely aren't mine, but not all of the (inadvertently, but inevitably) purloined phrases and ideas can be acknowledged with quotation marks. Many words, spoken and scrawled, got submerged somewhere along the way. For Streffen, Griffin, Autogena and Harwood, 'work' is a verb, not a noun, something that is constantly in process. This is now part, in a very small way, of those processes – although maybe not part of a network, except in a very surreptitious sense.