

# The Suspension of Privilege: Notes on Interfacing.

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SVA Critical Information Conference 2014

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Interventions, performances and other practices encompassed by the category of social practice, as well as those who are deemed as political are often subject to deterministic interpretation models and histories related to these concepts. This seems potentially problematic, as the value of a process may not lie in the coincidence of particular elements in its creation, but rather in their articulation. In this sense, the working definition of interface presents as a space for potentiality, to analyze (artistic) practices through their proposed forms of engagement. Reflecting on the interface incorporates value through the study of the dissemination process, complementing the study of context and materialization.

The current exploration has two fronts. The first corresponds to a conceptual assessment of the notion of interface as an idea, in relation to other concepts, realms and disciplines, such as computer science, philosophy, cognitive science, art, and critical theory. The second front is focused on the discussion of two specific projects by Bogota-based art collective, Group 0,29. These projects either contain or constitute interfaces, and the working title, *Attempting the Interface*, is a manifestation of intentions to identify the what/where/when of interfaces, when each or any apply.

## FIRST FRONT: MUSING ON THE INTERFACE

Let's begin by placing a temporary genealogy and a working definition. The term interface as is used here comes from Information Architecture and software development.

The GUI or Graphic User Interface is the upper layer of software allows communication between the logic components of the system and a human user. The architecture of a program is often divided into “layers” that go from simple procedures, such as mathematical operations, assigning values to variables, or connecting to databases, to complex routines, like the different services and functions offered by an application. What creates communication between these abstract data arrangements and a human user is the interface, using metaphors that resemble objects, gestures or concepts already present in the everyday life of the physical world, to create a syntax of familiar signs: airbrush, highlight, desktop, cut, paste, trash can, etc. As the graphic interface of some computer desktop or mobile phone systems has become widely popular, metaphors generated in computer systems are beginning to revert the process, making their way into everyday life.

As a working definition, I have chosen an excerpt from Alexander Galloway’s book *The Interface Effect*, which can provide a fertile playground to unpack and exemplify. This book creates a setting for the broad usage of the notion of interface in digital media, building from genealogies of the term expressed in culture history, as well as conceptual and ideological frameworks of the interface.<sup>1</sup> Galloway, an author, researcher and coder known for being the co-creator of data surveillance software Carnivor (with his collective RSG), shows us that the definition might prove as problematic as the delimitation and identification of an interface itself:

Frames, windows, doors, and other thresholds are those transparent devices that achieve more the less they do: for every moment of virtuosic immersion and connectivity, for every moment of volumetric delivery, of inopacity, the threshold becomes one notch more invisible, one notch more inoperable. As technology, the

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<sup>1</sup> Galloway’s conceptualization of the interface is made through the articulation and extension of different

more a dioptric device erases the traces of its own functioning (in actually delivering the thing represented beyond), the more it succeeds in its functional mandate; yet this very achievement undercuts the ultimate goal: the more intuitive a device becomes, the more it risks falling out of media altogether, becoming as naturalized as air or as common as dirt. To succeed, then, is at best self-deception and at worst self-annihilation.<sup>2</sup>

In Galloway's account, the interface is a process that leads to connectivity, may it be between subjects, or between them and information. The more efficient interfaces are, the more invisible they will be. The language used by Galloway is that of thresholds, effects and immateriality, which differentiates and unifies simultaneously, but makes it difficult to isolate an idea or process from the system. Moreover, if interfaces "erase traces of their own functioning",<sup>3</sup> they remove the distance between the subjects brought together. If there is no distance, does this mean that there is no interface *between* them?

Let's consider this idea for a moment, using the common example of the photographic image. When we hold a photograph in our hands, the image is not only, or rather not precisely *the* image, but is the instance of an image, in a medium which renders certain qualities: it has an aspect ratio, a texture, size, color, a thickness, probably even a refresh rate. We are aware that the image exists in relation to that specific materiality. Our experience of it is indiscernible from that materiality, and if we switch to another instance of that image, be it another print, or the same image displayed in a tablet or a phone, the image is then related to the sum of mediums on which we have experienced it. The medium enables connectivity between the image and a spectator/user; it trims or erases the

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<sup>2</sup> Galloway, *The Interface Effect*, 25

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

distance, but yet is never really invisible. What is indeed invisible is its condition of being part of the interface.

I will argue that there are both visible and invisible components to an interface, and that the visible part of the interface is indiscernible from what it connects and from the connecting process. It determines the way we interact, consume, read, feel, and experience. In Galloway, medium and interface reach an overlapping stage, but the concept of interface is then extended by evoking a broader history of media, pointing to different kinds of thresholds, paths and gateways on/through which the interface manifests. This is intended to emphasize the idea that an interface is not something in itself, but that it always exists as an effect that “opens up and allows passage to someplace beyond”.<sup>4</sup>

In a similar vein, Johanna Drucker pulls the concept of interface from computational systems, but instead of thinking of interface through its effects, she identifies it as experience. The way we go around the idea of proximity is that of the surface, a part of the system that has its own semantic rules. Because the interface is always context-responsive, the emergence of typologies is subject to what the realm on which the interface exists. In the case of computer systems and interactivity, the process of creating interfaces is generative and it creates itself as much as it creates the manners and semantics needed for engaging with the interface and the interfaced system. This dynamic process creates a particular form of perception on which there is not an easy way of disaggregating the constitutive parts of the system.

Following these ideas, I propose that the interface exists as a particular arrangement of mediums, contexts and signs that interpellate a user, consumer or audience, to interact

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 30.

within the rules implied by the arrangement itself. If we refer again to the example of graphic user interfaces, it is not difficult to identify the dialectics between learning and building the interface. Galloway also observes that the working concept of interface strongly evokes Fredric Jameson's idea of "cognitive mapping", but within the variation I intend to put forward, the notion of interface problematizes the abstraction process implied by Jameson's method. In the presence of an interface, cognitive mapping is affected, intervened or predicted, by suggesting a particular reading, path, or decryption key. As a consequence, an essential quality of interfaces emerges: they are always-already ideological.

The components of an interface are the key to its recognition and decryption. If interfaces are, as Galloway argues, a sort of dioptric device, then there is a theoretical "surface" on which the light (or the gaze) is reflected, and there might be then a theoretical "light" that can only be detected through the surfaces on which it reflects. This interplay between reflective and reflected determines the capacity in which we can experience and analyze certain phenomena. It has specific qualities contingent to the event on which connectivity is enabled. The idea of surface in relation to the image refers us to Vilem Flusser's notion of the image and to the construction of meaning. In Flusser, surfaces are in many cases equaled to images, as this is the way humans have programmed their world:

Images are significant surfaces. Images signify—mainly—something 'out there' in space and time that they have to make comprehensible to us as abstractions. This specific ability to abstract surfaces out of space and time and to project them back into space and time is what is known as 'imagination'. It is the precondition for the production and decoding of images.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Vilem Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography* (London: Reaktion Books, 2006), 8.

An image comes then from an abstraction process, whose results will vary in relation to cultural and personal contingencies. Flusser's idea of the world as codified is a form of interfacing the human experience to bridge the gap between the world and the alienated man.<sup>6</sup> His notion of significant surfaces as a token of this codification is helpful to understand how interfaces are present in our everyday life, rendering subjective forms of abstraction that help us to cope with the vastness of the information around us. Identifying the abstraction process is key to understanding how interfaces affect the construction of meaning and of communication processes.

Jacques Rancière offers us a different entry point to abstraction in images. This is, through resemblance. Through identifying flows between mediums or forms of art, and at the same time, Rancière attempts to render the multiple meanings, stadiums and states related to the production and the life of an image. For him,

[image] refers to two different things. There is the simple relationship that produces the likeness of an original: not necessarily its faithful copy, but simply what suffices to stand for it. And there is the interplay of operations that produces what we call art: or precisely an alteration of resemblance.<sup>7</sup>

This passage comes from a reflection on the opening scenes of *Au Hassard* Balthazar, a film by Robert Bresson, in which Rancière explains how the production of cinematic images entails an abstraction process, to show us a event (a baptism anchored in place, time and characters) or a smaller semantic unit that is part of it (the minimum set of visual gestures that convey the action of baptism). What he suggests here is that, what we understand as *the* image comes from an abstraction process resulting in an image that is

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<sup>6</sup> Vilem Flusser, "The Codified World" in Andreas Stöhl, ed. *Writings: Vilém Flusser* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 35-41.

<sup>7</sup> Jacques Rancière, *The Future of the Image* (London/New York: Verso Books, 2007), 6.

“image enough”. It keeps resemblance to a more complex structure referenced by the instance of the image that we see, organized by the time-space of the montage. It fulfills a function within a larger structure of meaning that is created, not only through the specificity of the medium and the narrative, but through the particular experience implied by the form of distribution and the context of its presentation. The nesting units [image]–significant surface–medium–context reveal the interface.

What the idea of interface offers us are means to deal with mediations, rules of engagement to produce specific readings in relation to the stimuli we are confronted to. In this sense, interfaces always offer us representational forms of what they interface. They might not convey all the elements or meanings of what is being pulled from the structure, but they offer routes for approaching it; they offer a “symbolic topology” that allows us to deal with a content. In an era of distraction, short focus spans, small amounts of time to “deal with things”, and a virtual impossibility to “dwell on a thought”, interfaces acquire the greatest importance, as they largely determine the possibility of a certain content to be grasped or not. The great anxiety of our era is not how to produce information, but how to handle the vast amount of it that is produced everyday. What we use to cope with this vastness or excess are interfaces.

## **SECOND FRONT: ART AND/AS INTERFACE**

The works I propose to analyze are largely rooted in the construction of interfaces. They address different topics, but share the concern of creating a redundancy of instances. This is, simultaneous appearances in different forms, spaces and media: academic texts, music videos, handout information, performances, curatorial projects, fake fairs, online

courses or student workshops. Each occurrence has the purpose of interpellating a specific audience, or a number of them: pedestrians, artists, academics, children, farmers, or the “general public”. Some of them are meant to be undistinguishable, while some others are designed to draw great attention.

IDCT is a project that stands-in for an institution disappeared in the merger of different governmental dependencies. In late 2007, the District Institute of Culture and Tourism of Bogota (or IDCT for its Spanish acronym) was absorbed by the city department of culture, recreation and sports. Organizational chart was simplified and programs outsourced, as a consequence of budget cuts. After experimenting for a few years, the city government acknowledged the void left by the institutional merge, thus creating the Institute of the Arts. The temporary space between the disappearance of an Institute and the emergence of the next was used to put in motion the project: *District Institute of Tactical Culture* (also IDCT, for its acronym in Spanish), an occupation project, not of the physical space, but of the residual image of the institution in the collective imaginary of the city.

IDCT combines practices such as performance, audiovisual production, informal education, editorial creation and guerrilla communication, to give life to an “institution” that, lacking a physical office, exists as the many instances used by district departments to make presence in different spaces of the city. IDCT took the place of the former IDCT to perform interventions on public space, distribution of information, citizen service fairs, a web portal, publications, and other applications that emerged as new workspaces were enabled. Group 0,29 takes advantage of the public presence of city institutions to maximize the reach of their actions and messages, while presenting a certain form of institutional

critique directed towards public presence, policies and procedures. This takes place through the speculation on the visibility of the institution, which serves as a platform for deploying messages that range from the promotion of responsible consumption to tactics for surviving the overwhelming reality of urban life in contexts of low wages in emergent economies.

In IDCT, the voice of the content becomes important. Connectivity is presented here as creating a false continuity of the institutional presence, by filling the temporary “gap”. Examples like the stabilization of informal visual codes for negotiating fees in public transportation through handouts and instruction cards come from everyday exchanges between citizens. They have become widespread through sustained usage in time and collective agreement. Through the intersection between the content and the interface, these gestures are understood as public policy.

*The Trans* emerges at the peak of the debate over the Colombia-USA FTA regulations over food, patents and policies. It consists of a fruits and vegetables music band, different exhibition formats, a print series, interventions in supermarkets and a series of workshops that reflect on the subject of Genetically Modified Organisms in Colombia. The project invites local citizens to engage in a debate over the impact of the introduction of GMO food and seed patents in Colombia.

The songs by the trans come for popular music like reggaeton and carranga, replacing the lyrics of very popular songs with messages on GMO awareness, health risks and threats to local cultures and nutrition practices, and the Free Trade Agreement between Colombia and the United States. The band has toured different Colombian regions Latin American countries, using local music to carry their message, creating

exhibitions with contents specific to the agricultural practices and products of each region and disseminating information on GMO awareness and policies in each country.

Each of the instances of The Trans carries a similar message that varies in depth, extension and specificity according to the limitations or requirements of each interface. The sum of instances is also a range of visibilities on which some of the appearances are largely prepared *as* presentation (like the band, its music videos, lyrics, etc.) while some are meant to go unnoticed *as* intervention (like the fake Chiquita Brands stickers or allegedly governmental labeling of GMO products). The Trans acts largely as a container of messages that come from specialized organizations, grassroots groups, farmers associations and seed guardians. The contribution proposed by The Trans is that of carrying the message, and disseminating it through the redundant usage of the formats created by the art collective. These are meant to increase connectivity through the usage of languages already in the repertoire of the potential audiences of the project. In many cases, even children become fans of the band.

Early in this reflection I mentioned commonplaces of art on which these practices usually gravitate to. I would like to propose that shifting the attention to the forms on which exchange and communication processes take place, as, for example, through the idea of interfacing, creates a space of possibility to discern broader implications, meanings and reach of art practice, away from the narrowing definitions of the “social practice” and the “political art”, on which projects are precodified and therefore assessed by these categories. A meditation on the idea of interface renders possibilities that go beyond dyads such as medium-message or aesthetics-politics, into a more comprehensive consideration about reception, communication and agency.

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