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Proceedings

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Notions of 'Users' in a Performance about Systems of Control

Abstract

This presentation is about an interdisciplinary performance (*Users*, a work-in-progress) formed by spoken monologues that illuminate the perspectives of two women on opposite sides of the digital and cultural divide; one a white 21st data analyst, and the other, a corrections officer, and woman of color, employed in the prison system.

Keywords

Performance, narrative, data analysis, law enforcement, sex work, exploitation, social media, surveillance

Introduction

In the performance *Users*, questions are raised for both characters, as to how to locate personal meaning, and coherence in a world where ports of connectedness are the same as those that fragment their personal and emotional landscapes.

Users, is an interdisciplinary performance formed by spoken monologues that illuminate the perspectives of two women on opposite sides of the digital and cultural divide; one a white 21st data analyst (the 'Analyst') who disseminates reality and self worth through the digital lens of her profession; the other, a corrections officer (the 'Enforcer'), a woman of color, and former sex worker, employed in the prison system.

The impetus for this piece comes from my creative practice, as a performance and video artist, as well as from working with underserved populations in my arts practice and in teaching digital technology.

What I am exploring in this performance is how the nature of work and engagement conducted in the online sphere (I am referring to anonymous data gathering, shared online documents, and forms of communications exchanged through social media), have pernicious undercurrents as they relate to surveillance and psychological oppressions parallel to those that are imposed by the state in a punitive or correctional context.

Where the state seeks control of the body, and by turns, requires punishment –in the form of incarceration- for purported transgressions against its legal apparatus, the aims and motives of the online experience - while seemingly altruistic in the guise of clean, spirited graphics and free-memberships to online communities- are at their core, economically based, with the potential for punitive measures towards the very individuals it solicits as members or 'friends'.

In *Social Media Surveillance*, Christian Fuchs writes:

Internet optimism suffered a drawback when the dot.com crisis took effect in 2000 and resulted in the bankruptcy of any Internet companies, that had been founded on venture capital investments that could not be translated into actual profits. The rise of what was somewhat mistakenly called social media-blogs,

social networking sites, micro-blogs, content sharing sites and wikis, spurred new hopes (and foundations for another bubble) that have been represented by Google and Facebook among others.

He goes on to state:

At the same time, a new neo-liberal and techno-deterministic round of techno-optimism emerged. In this context of heightened state and commercial surveillance, new discussions of about the societal and ethical implications of online media, and especially social media emerged.

In the performance, the Analyst character makes her living analyzing the data-driven proclivities of others. Here she ponders the tasks involved in her profession:

Analyst

What do I do? I follow the patterns of USERS; those currents of data –incoming and outgoing- tides of online presence hitting the beach of algorithmic analysis, watching the What, Why and How of things; how they move, peak and break like waves. How is it that those addictions of comfort that do us in, can sometimes bring great joy, while deleting hours not yet accrued, as we measure ourselves in Age, Race, Gender; and in turn are measured, up and down, for Benchmarks, Income, Output, and Deliverables.

Her labor is based on the aggregated information she is able to extract and analyze and, and how this information -even as it measures specific facets of 'self' - can be broken down and monetized.

In digital theorist Jaron Lanier's most recent book, *Who Owns the Future?* (2013), he rails' against the behemoths he refers to as the 'Siren Servers' such as Google and Facebook, who take the information gathered by their user base as a means for generating revenue. This, he contends, concentrates wealth in the hands of the few who control data centers.



(Fig. 1) *Users*, Dixon Place, New York City, © 2015

By contrast, the other character - the Enforcer- a working class woman of color, is deeply engaged in the physical experience of labor as well as its implications, worth and meaning. Her labor (and that of her ancestry) refer to periods of both empowerment, and disenfranchisement:

Enforcer

I come by my wits the hard way; life's lessons. Oh my ancestors had it good on the islands with their own cane plantation and servants; and my great-grandfather a white man from Scotland teaching his children to

read. Thought they could own the world. And so imagined they might have it better in America, and left our quiet island and bought brownstones in Harlem, and worked as domestics.

They had it nice for a time. But it then it changed; domestic jobs became factory jobs. And it was harder living and never so good again. Then, those jobs gone, in come the drugs. And my father starts selling blood for money.

Socio-economic shifts in the availability of adequate-paying work that involve labor also marks a shift in personal and familial well-being. The Enforcer, goes on to talk of being an impoverished single parent and - temporarily- a sex worker, understanding that her means of support is a form of labor that is as inequitable as it is exploitive, likening it to the plantation system and speaking of herself as being a person who is 'Used' albeit one who is paid for her use:

Enforcer

There are the nice lies they use to get on the inside; one way or another. Ah yes, all familiar to me. Especially, when all alone with a child and no man in sight, then what? I don't complain. I get right to solving something that's broke.

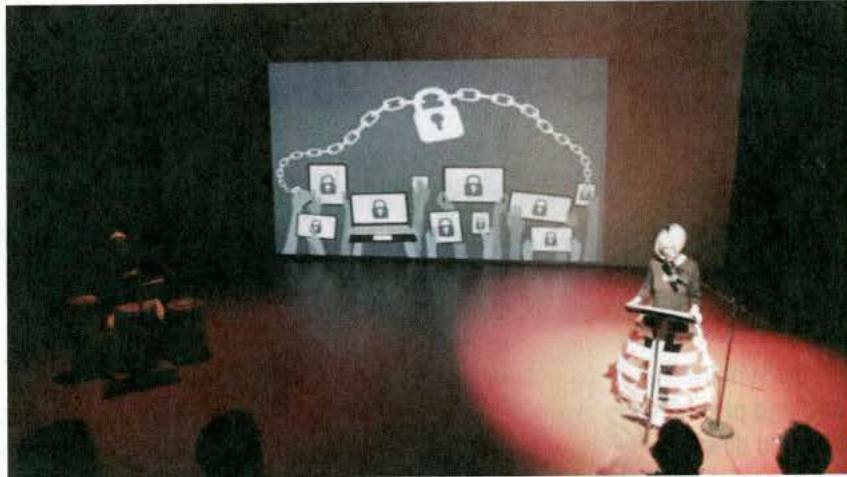
And so it happened that I come upon the type who would pay you for your time. And you could go right up to the 37th floor of their office and they would have you come in to their fine surroundings with its modern furnishings, and lock the door. And then they strip naked to have to you do things to them. And sometimes I take off my clothes, and have things done to me. All while office work gets done outside that door. And I never saw so much money as from the men with those offices in the nice tall buildings with clean straight lines in the names on their doors and so many people under their control. Like on a plantation. It could not last of course, such a fine, easy and uncomplicated arrangement of Users, and those they Used.

As language and its meanings are an ever-evolving process, in employing *Users*, as the title for the performance, I play with the word's fluctuations in definition; for while it once more commonly referred to drug addicts, in current 21st century parlance, it generally refers to users of computers, software, or online services.

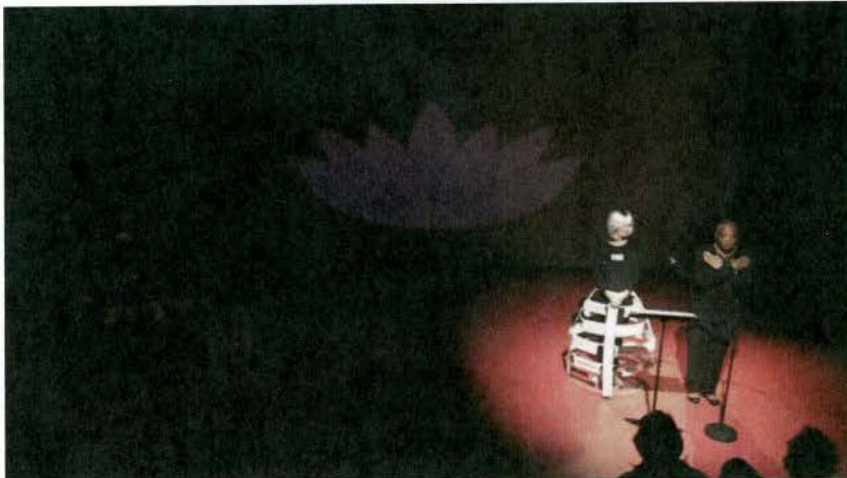
However, a 'user' can also refer to one who exploits, or takes advantage of others for personal gain.

The U.S. which historically relied on the unpaid labor of an enslaved population to build economic prowess prior to the industrial revolution, still wrestles with a dialectic embedded in the cultural and capital socio-economic proclivities of its past.

Such tensions are represented in these two characters, who are caught in the position as those who 'Use' as well as those who are 'Used' by a system not of their design. As the performance unfolds, questions are raised for both as to how to locate autonomy and coherence in a world where notions of self and interconnectedness may be inexorably intertwined with the same systems that are simultaneously capable of exploiting, fragmenting and constricting their sense of being.



(Fig. 2) © 2015



(Fig. 3) *Users* (Performance) © 2015
Dixon Place, New York City
Performers: Mandy Morrison, Lori Greene, Gabriella Dennery

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Biography

Mandy Morrison, Artist/Writer-Director / Performer

Morrison uses video and performance to explore how the body projects itself within varying contexts. In 2006, she produced and directed the documentary film *Potential Partners* (2006), exploring who, and why we love. Her performance, video and film work have been exhibited and screened internationally in galleries, museums, and festivals including the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Brooklyn Museum, the Künstlerhaus e.V., Hamburg, and CINESONIKA in Vancouver. As a distinguished educator she has been visiting faculty at Pratt Institute, and Rutgers University among others. Grants and honors include fellowships from the Illinois Arts Council, the Council on the Arts and Humanities on Staten Island, the New York Foundation for the Arts, and the New York State Council on the Arts, as well as residencies from the University of Wisconsin, and Ohio's Wexner Center for the Arts. (www.mandymachine.com)