

BEING UNDETECTABLE (2016) — THE RIGHT TO NOT EXIST, MOMENTARILY

BEING UNDETECTABLE (2016) — O DIREITO A MOMENTANEAMENTE NÃO EXISTIR

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Hudson, P. (2016). *Being undetectable* [Art installation].
<https://peterdavidhudson.com/being-undetectable>

On the way between the workspace and the domestic space, the citizen THX 1138 enters a cubicle that functions as a confessional. Once there, he sits down. A backlit image of *Christ Giving His Blessing* (1478), by the German painter Hans Memling, looks ahead — but not directly at THX 1138 — and greets him with the phrase: “my time is yours”. From that moment on, THX 1138’s reflections on his day, his failures and concerns are recounted and occasionally interrupted by interjections from a mechanical voice whose message is vague, impersonal, and as unresponsive as the image. THX 1138 speaks alone, and the viewer may wonder whether he is truly being heard or whether, in that tiny space, separated from outside noise by an accordion glass door with a metal frame, THX 1138 is, finally, alone with himself — free to say what he truly feels.

The film to which this scene belongs is by George Lucas, titled *THX 1138* (1971), the same name as the character in the scene we described. The narrative structure of *THX 1138* is set within a hyper-surveilled, totalitarian society where central power exerts control over citizens in multiple ways: policing carried out by androids; the strict organization of citizens’ time and space (in a panoptic regime); the standardization of their clothing; compulsory medication; and the constant presence of a synthetic, disembodied voice — a kind of artificial intelligence. Within this regime of total surveillance, the confessional-cubicle where we leave the citizen THX 1138 appears to be a space of suspension, where the subject can perhaps feel alone with himself.

In the contemporary reality of what Shoshana Zuboff (2019) defines as “surveillance capitalism”, digital devices enable continuous observation and datafication — that is, the systematic conversion of actions, behaviours, and information into data. This process operates on multiple scales, from satellites that enable global internet coverage and real-time planetary mapping to smartwatches that constantly monitor each individual’s biometric rhythms. These data, converted into digital matter, feed systems whose operations go far beyond the more visible uses, such as personalized advertising or the manipulation of election outcomes.

The average citizen is rarely fully aware of the extent or final destination of their data. Kate Crawford (2021) compares data extraction to mining. Extraction is a metaphor that supports a broader comparison encompassing not only personal data but also the

mineral materials contained within digital devices. James Bridle (2018), on the other hand, compares the value of data to that of petroleum — both economically valuable and widely circulated resources. But he distinguishes them by their nature: oil is finite; data, by contrast, multiplies endlessly. Digital life manifests itself in and feeds on all our actions, choices, and even hesitations, which are continuously extracted, archived, and monetized. In the end, we are not so far from fiction. We can replace the image and synthetic voice that shared the cubicle with THX 1138 with the networks and algorithms to which we voluntarily — and often enthusiastically — hand over our information, as expressed in the way we cherish our personal devices. Assuming THX 1138 is truly alone, do we too have similar spaces, breaches in surveillance, where we can equally be alone?

It is the possibility of an exception — of unsupervised privacy within a surveillance system — that brings us to *Being Undetectable* (2016), an installation by artist Peter Hudson. The work gives tangible form to the human desire to escape constant observation and monitoring, presenting itself as a physical experience of isolation and invisibility. The architectural design of *Being Undetectable* was developed in partnership with Jerome Tsui (the founding director at the architectural firm Eighteen Twenty Eight), and the installation was exhibited at the Royal College of Art, London, in June 2016 and at Creative Matters, Dulwich College in London in September of the same year. The installation consists of a cube-shaped structure measuring 2.5 m per side, clad in black rubber that covers 50 cm-thick metal walls, standing out starkly in the urban landscape. Installed in the outdoor space, its cubic form and dark colour create a sharp contrast with the surrounding environment. The materials not only create a physical barrier but also turn the work into a Faraday “cage”, blocking any form of communication between the inside and the outside. Inside the box, each visitor, left alone with themselves, becomes physically invisible and undetectable by digital systems. The installation emphasizes the idea of privacy by materializing it as absolute. Solitude is both the reward and, simultaneously, a potential source of discomfort, oppression, and claustrophobia.

On a theoretical level, Alexander Galloway (2004) identifies the protocol as the central element of networked computing. Protocols define recommendations, rules, and technological standards that regulate forms of access, circulation, and recognition within the internet’s infrastructure. Although defined by restricted groups, these protocols are implemented for mass use. As the author states: “computer protocols are vetted out between negotiating parties and then materialized in the real world by large populations of participants (in the case citizens, and in the other computer users)” (Galloway, 2004, p. 7). Their ubiquity makes them invisible mechanisms, yet profoundly operative in all digital interactions.

For Galloway (2004), protocols are part of the construction of a decentralized structure that enables communication but also control, and thus they also allow for the strategic use of glitches and deviations as forms of resistance and reconfiguration of digital space. The subversive exploration of the network has been carried out by figures such as hackers, who challenge the legibility and predictability of systems — the network itself accommodates the “outside” by integrating it — but also by artists, and it is in this space

that the installation operates, as an interval within the technological surveillance system. *Being Undetectable* does not represent a confrontation with or escape from the system, but rather a possibility within it — a suspension of surveillance, where presence ceases to matter. Both the confessional-cubicle and the black cube exist within dense systems of control — digital or otherwise, real or imagined — and operate within them as “zones of silence”. Just as the image of Christ does not meet THX 1138’s gaze, and the voice does not seem to care about what he says, the visitor of the installation too will not be seen or heard — but they won’t be able to see or hear other people either.

Among digital artworks that attempt to address privacy issues through a lack of connection to the world of ubiquity, we highlight yet another installation, *Curiosity Cabinet, at the End of the Millennium* (1995), by Canadian visual artist Catherine Richards. The juxtaposition between *Being Undetectable* and *Curiosity Cabinet, at the End of the Millennium* offers a significant contrast in strategies of surveillance suspension. Both works use Faraday’s “box” principle to interrupt the flow of electromagnetic waves within a defined space, but they differ in their relationship to the visibility of the body. In *Curiosity Cabinet*, the wooden structure covered with metal mesh does not visually isolate the visitor from the outside, allowing them to see and be seen, suggesting that although communication does not occur digitally, it can still happen in other ways. In *Being Undetectable*, the total opacity of the structure eliminates any indication of human presence inside. Here, invisibility is both digital and physical; we don’t know if anyone is inside, and this uncertainty becomes an essential part of the work. In this sense, *Being Undetectable* proposes not only a resistance to the system but a refusal to be readable, a deliberate self-erasure, a possibility of existing without a trace. Both, however, explore what art can offer as a space of exception: a break in the normative regime of visibility permitted by the protocols that regulate access, communication, and identification.

It is important to raise the question again: is it possible to be invisible in a world where everything is continuously datified, stored, and monitored? Art functions as a speculative device, presenting us with the possibility that formulating the question itself takes shape as a space, within a specific time where the visitor is invited to act. This possibility, as an experience, allows us to momentarily suspend the everyday temporal flow, creating the conditions from which it is possible to experience the exception that is the absence of connection to others and to what surrounds us. We are faced with the possibility of imagining ourselves, as visitors of the installation, under the effect of obsolescence of the electronic devices we carry. Perhaps we feel anxiety, and we may also feel the urge to check or search for some information to which we do not currently have access. We lack the “network” that connects us to others, and we also lack the sight of others with whom we visually communicate in public space. But we can look beyond the immediate and reflect on a less digital life and its social and ecological effects. The installation *Being Undetectable* is, in itself, a space of reflection, and by allowing us to use it, it becomes a form of resistance that raises questions about our ways of thinking and acting.

Translation: Ece Canlı

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Ana Carvalho (Porto, 1970) is an assistant professor at the University of Maia and a researcher at Arts and Communication Research Centre of the University of Algarve. She coordinates the *Ephemeral Expanded* project and has developed curatorial work, including the exhibitions “Omnisciência: Estratégias de Fractura e Fuga” (Omniscience: Strategies for Fracture and Escape, 2021) and “Abducted Realities” (2023). Since 2016, she has organized the “Expressions Between Sound and Image Meeting”. Her research themes intertwine digital technologies and their social implications with ecological issues. She is a founding member of the Earthsea Association.

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