

Kevin Day + Nathan McNinch

a scanner ubiquity



OCTOBER 24 to NOVEMBER 27, 2014



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7 SEYMOUR ST W KAMLOOPS, BC
TUESDAY to FRIDAY 10-5; SATURDAY 10-4



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a scanner ubiquity is an installation of three works by conceptual artists Kevin Day and Nathan McNinch from Vancouver, BC. Their simple machines and counter graphs, intentionally designed to produce obsolescence as a point of resistance to an information age dominated by post-Fordist capital, challenge us to become aware of the omnipresent data in which we are swimming; and like a fish pulled out of water, we may gasp for embodied breath, temporarily disoriented by our sudden emergence into the unfamiliar and rarified air of data awareness. One of their works called *the how of this is helplessly entangled; yet not a thing remains as it was* is an installation of several machines that somewhat aggressively retrieve physiological data (e.g., height and density) from the audience via a small camera, and hobbled by their own obsolescent design, print out that data as squiggly lines, continuously in real time. Another called *mon vieux ciel dans un autre juin* is an installation consisting of a custom-made one pixel camera that prints out its data at programmed intervals, fragmented beyond economic function and all legibility. The last work is composed of several hand drawn “countergraphs” that are highly idiosyncratic and focused on the ephemeral and fleeting moment of their birth in randomly collected data; unlike infographics, the data darling of the moment, these countergraphs are nonsensical and of no use for corporate data mining. In iconoclastically novel ways, these works of randomness and obsolescence engage us to become temporarily aware of data omnipresence and our submergence in its deepening ocean.

I had the pleasure of setting down with Kevin Day and Nathan McNinch to talk about their philosophy, inspirations, and other matters of surprise and interest.

Question: What was your inspiration for the show?

Kevin: I was looking at polygraph tests and [considering] the idea that some kind of mechanistic truth could be derived from human experience, the human body, and that data gets quantified and analyzed in a way that might be detrimental to a human being, or how the experience of a human being becomes compartmentalized. Immaterial labour is omnipresent in our world today as a means of extracting surplus value. Also there’s a problematic tendency to want to become immaterial and discard the body. Implicit in my work is a critique of post-humanism, so I emphasize the ways in which the body might be mapped aggressively and its data extracted. So it’s important for me to exaggerate that to a point where it becomes ridiculous, or in our case, obsolete and unintelligible.

Nathan: Most people today are carrying around a computer with them—e.g., an iPhone—all the time, but most of us have no idea how they work and don’t care how they work, and I’ve always found that interesting. Politically that represents an increasing gap between the people who have the knowledge to build these devices and those that use them that I see as just as important as the gap between the wealthy and the poor. Society has chosen to be oblivious and just accept the tools that are provided for us. In a way, this is a separation of our bodies from nature through the layers of data abstraction that we use, but don’t necessarily understand. In a more natural context, things are more transparent.

Question: What was your process? How did you translate these ideas into your art?

Kevin: We knew that we wanted data to be extracted from human bodies, from the audience, with a machine that destroys data on its own, making it a self-defeating, futile device. We knew that we wanted to deliberately abstract data, so it would be unintelligible and useless.

Nathan: The information is still there in the data, but it’s no longer useful, and it’s not something that is *precious*. Unlike the data we put online, e.g., on Facebook, our data becomes unimportant because it gets turned into a squiggly line or a single pixel. All the conventional measures of a person—height, gender, race, and so on—are erased from consideration.

Question: Is obsolescence and randomness a theme in all your work?

Kevin: Yes it's a running theme... I make works that try to negate their original purpose. In my hand drawn countergraphs, I utilize the aesthetics of infographics, but I select values randomly and try to make my graphs as situated and personal as possible. When I look at those graphs a month or year later I have no idea why I chose those values. They have no value to anyone but myself; they just map a particular moment in my mental workings, the moment when I'm creating the work and beyond that they are completely obsolete.

Nathan: Today, data collection is largely random because there are so many machines that are collecting data that is not being used for anything, e.g., cameras on buses. Because it's so random, it's not a threat the way it would have been perceived 20 years ago. There's so much data that it has become simply noise.

Question: Is your imagined audience a force in what you create?

Kevin: The main piece of the show *forces* an interaction from the audience, unlike the use of interactivity as a kind of buzz word that assumes/implies an equal exchange between the audience and the work, when in reality the audience has been reduced to some kind of avatar or, as Nathan says some kind of remote control operator. In my mind, this piece extracts something from the audience, so they are meant to feel a little wrought. There's a bit of aggressiveness there, the way the data is collected without the knowledge of the audience with force in a clandestine way, and then privatized.

Obsolescence, omnipresence, randomness, data truth, exploitation, critique of the desire for the immaterialism of the post-human—all are here in the thickness of these embodied and hobbled installations that bring us to our senses, if just for a moment, and inspire us to awake to the data that we constantly breathe in and out, in and out, in and...

Wayne Egers is a filmmaker, artist, and poet with interests ranging from Zen Buddhism, deep ecology, phenomenology, and writing from the body.