



## BIROn - Birkbeck Institutional Research Online

Iler, Seda (2017) Unsettling the 'friendly' gaze of dataveillance: the dissident potential of mediatised aesthetics in Blast Theory's Karen. *International Journal of Performance Arts and Digital Media* 13 (1), pp. 77-92. ISSN 1479-4713.

Downloaded from: <https://eprints.bbk.ac.uk/id/eprint/18828/>

*Usage Guidelines:*

Please refer to usage guidelines at <https://eprints.bbk.ac.uk/policies.html> or alternatively contact [lib-eprints@bbk.ac.uk](mailto:lib-eprints@bbk.ac.uk).

Seda Ilter is a lecturer in Theatre and Performance Studies at Birkbeck College, University of London. Her research interests include theoretical and aesthetic implications of new media technologies and culture in theatre; theory and practice of contemporary theatre; and new writing for performance. Her writing has been published in *Contemporary Theatre Review*; *Modern Drama*; *Body, Space and Technology Journal*. Her monograph *Mediatished Dramaturgy: Drama for the Mediatished Stage since 1990* will be published in the Methuen Drama Engage Series. Seda is also interested in the journey from British to Turkish theatre: she has written about this academically, and also directed her translation of Tim Crouch's *The Author* in Istanbul (Talimhane Theatre, 2015-2016) (Theater an der Ruhr, Germany, 2015-2016).

Contact: Birkbeck College, University of London, 43 Gordon Square, London WC1H 0PD, UK.

Email: [s.ilter@bbk.ac.uk](mailto:s.ilter@bbk.ac.uk)

**Abstract:**

**Unsettling the ‘friendly’ gaze of dataveillance: The dissident potential of mediatised aesthetics in Blast Theory’s *Karen***

What are the artistic languages and forms that can be used to make sense of the larger-than-human scale of big data and engage with its ideological machinery? How can theatre and performance in a mediatised culture disclose the performativity of dataveillance and open spaces for thinking differently and critically about it? Blast Theory’s interactive, virtual theatre piece *Karen* (2015), which is formed through a smart-phone app and is communicated individually to its participants on their phones, addresses such questions. *Karen* is designed to mine data from the participants, which is then used to profile each of them through a personalised data report. Blast Theory’s piece, on the one hand, offers a familiar, interactive and participatory experience, generating a sense of agency and control. On the other hand, it reminds the participants that they are not in control of their own data by making the familiar experience strange and subverting the performativity of surveillance. Drawing on and combining the notions of mediatisation and info-aesthetics, this article argues that through its ‘mediatised aesthetics’ *Karen* provokes critical recognition, challenging our habitual understandings of data surveillance, and illustrates a paradigm-in-progress to explore the new aesthetics of the mediatised age.

**Keywords:** big data; dataveillance; mediatised aesthetics; info-aesthetics; mediatisation; Blast Theory; *Karen*

## **Unsettling the ‘friendly’ gaze of dataveillance: The dissident potential of mediatised aesthetics in Blast Theory’s *Karen***

### ***From Erdoğan to Karen: Living in a big data culture***

Control is not discipline. You do not confine people with a highway. But by making highways, you multiply the means of control ... people can travel infinitely and ‘freely’ without being confined while being perfectly controlled. (Deleuze 2006, 322)

On the night of 15 July 2016, before the attempted coup failed in Turkey, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan FaceTimed Turkish people on live television to ask them to take to the streets against the coup. Following the call, Erdoğan sent a text message to 68 million people’s personal mobile phones and asked the citizens ‘not to give up resistance for [their] country, land and flag [and to] teach a lesson to those traitors that attempted to invade [your] country.’<sup>1</sup> When I received the message on my Turkish mobile phone, I was following the distressing news in Britain via social media and saw the online comments posted by numerous people about the President’s text message. It was neither a virus, nor an ugly joke. Moreover, it did not have a shocking effect on the majority of people as they have been familiar with acts of censorship, the slowing down or cutting off of social media networks, and with the closing down of oppositional mass media companies. I was still perplexed by the message and the fact that the President contacted me through my ‘personal’ phone, when I received a message on my British mobile line from Karen whose last few messages I had ignored. Karen was not a friend or a relative, but a fictional character in Blast Theory’s app-based interactive piece *Karen* (2015) that aims to explore the ways in which big data culture works, ‘particularly how governments and large companies such as Facebook are collecting

data on us secretly and using it without our consent.’ (Blast Theory, 2015) In *Karen* a friendly life-coach (Karen) interacts with each participant through a phone app and offers her services ‘to help you work through a few things in your life.’ (Blast Theory, 2015) Throughout the interaction with Karen, which involves one downloading the app and responding to her questions drawn from profiling tests, Karen collects personal data from each participant and uses this information in the end to psychologically profile him/her in a personalised data report. The report reveals the mostly invisible workings of information technologies and information structures as surveillance systems, which the individuals are not often aware of or are too accustomed to, in order to understand the risks underlying their data-driven lives.

[Image here/ Image reference will be: Blast Theory, 2015]

*Karen* and Erdoğan might not seem to have much in common at first glance.

However, the latter can be imagined as a real-life echo of the former, demonstrating how data surveillance works beyond individuals’ control or critical recognition. Illustrating Deleuze’s idea of ‘societies of control’ (Deleuze 1992), which refers to the wide and invisible exercise of control under the guise of freedom, agency and opportunity, they highlight data mining and data surveillance as the cornerstones of such societies. As we freely navigate on the internet, instantly communicate with others or count our calories and tag our locations via our personal devices, we agree to the tracking, storage and usage of our personal information. This free-floating, universal mechanism consequently shapes how we use these technologies, and ultimately our actions and perception. Therefore, these two examples intersect at a point that is strikingly symptomatic of our continually surveyed societies. The real scenario presents a glimpse to the social backdrop of *Karen* and highlights the urgency of the artistic response it puts forward. Drawing on this idea, I aim to explore the ways in which *Karen* engages with often-concealed processes of datafication, and how through its subversive mediated aesthetics (more on this later) it provokes the participants’ critical recognition of these

processes, challenging their habitual assumptions and behaviours that construct their understandings of and responses to surveillance. Before exploring *Karen*, it is useful to identify the socio-cultural context of data surveillance and the aesthetic framework for the proposed critical enquiry.

### ***Dataveillance: Controlling the Contemporary***

In “Postscript on the Societies of Control” Gilles Deleuze furthers Michel Foucault’s idea of a disciplinary society, in which one moves from one environment of enclosure to another while sustaining the status quo, by arguing that ‘the disciplines underwent a crisis’ (Deleuze 1992, 3) and led to the *societies of control*. In societies of control ‘one is never finished with anything--the corporation, the educational system, the armed services being metastable states coexisting in one and the same modulation, like a universal system of deformation.’ (Deleuze 1992, 5) The digital technologies, permeating every area of our lives today, are the machines through which the societies of control operate with increased efficiency. In today’s widely technologised and networked cultures of the developed and developing countries, social life and the smallest details of our individual actions are filled with media contents and are transformed into and stored as usable data. We leave digital footprints behind us after we visit different locations, look up products or connect with other people. Lev Manovich identifies this culture as information society in which we ‘turn our own lives into an information archive by storing our emails, chats, sms (short message services), digital photos, GPS data, favorite music tracks, favorite television shows, and other “digital traces” of our existence.’ (Manovich 2008, 335) The fundamentally interconnected ideas of Deleuze’s societies of control and Manovich’s information society directly relate to the notion of dataveillance or data surveillance - the systematic use of big data systems and data mining in the monitoring of individuals’ actions and communications. Still a nebulous socio-technical and cultural phenomenon in terms of its definition and ontological framing, big

(social) data refers to the new data ecosystem which is ‘less about data that is big than it is about a capacity to search, aggregate, and cross-reference large data sets.’ (boyd and Crawford 2012, 663) Big data therefore ‘is not simply about collecting all kinds of facts about everything from human beings to commodities [...] Rather, it is about establishing relations between all these different facts and moments [and] managing data and transforming it into usable and sellable knowledge’ (Langlois, Redden, and Elmer 2015, 3).

Throughout the data mining and surveillance processes individuals are often misled through the myth that ‘information, and particularly digital information, is free.’ (Couldry 2012, 9) Free, however, comes with a special cost as it ‘warps our normal sense of cost vs. benefit, and people end up trading their personal data for less than its worth. This tendency to undervalue privacy is exacerbated by companies deliberately making sure that privacy is not salient to users.’ (Schneier 2015, 50) For example, though we might think that we use Gmail services such as large storage space for free, we, in fact, agree to pay with our personal information, having our ‘incoming and outgoing emails scanned by a piece of software to produce targeted advertising.’ (Langlois, Redden and Elmer 2015, 3) Our consent contributes to the normalisation of datafication and data surveillance, namely, of the fact that ‘our social exchanges and relations increasingly became encoded, quantified, and commodified and used to track, target, and predict individual and social behaviours.’ (Langlois, Redden and Elmer 2015, 3-4) We become a part and product of the forces involved in capturing data that enable ‘invasions of privacy, decreased civil freedoms, and increased state and corporate control.’ (boyd and Crawford 2012, 663-664) Our consent, however, does not ‘mean we make an informed decision agreeing to it; instead, we accept it either because we get value from the services or because we are offered a package deal that includes surveillance and don’t have any real choice in the matter.’ (Schneier 2015, 47) It is important to note here that individuals are not necessarily given a choice: if one does not agree to dataveillance, one cannot benefit

from the services of new technologies. Furthermore, the surveillance mechanisms work in a way that creates the misleading idea that the individual has agency and control over his/her actions and decisions. As Google's CEO Eric Schmidt revealed: 'We know where you are. We know where you've been. We can more or less know what you're thinking about.' (in Schneier 2015, 22) Although Google seems to let us manage our advertisement preferences, we actually 'have no rights to delete anything [we] don't want there' (Schneier 2015, 23) and the search engine tracks our movements, choices and even thoughts without our clear awareness or approval of it. Our involvement with data mining processes is often 'without our knowledge, and typically without our consent' (Schneier 2015, 20), and our ostensible acceptance is based on systematically regulated and repeated illusion of individual control and agency over personal data. Hence, in the context of the rapid, free-floating, borderless and ubiquitous control mechanisms that Deleuze refers to, what is at stake is our agency and control over our privacy. However, this often escapes our recognition thanks to the illusion of individual freedom: freedom to access and create information, connect to the world, and navigate as we like.

Evading and resisting big data practices is challenging also because those practices are often invisible. We go everywhere with our smart phones without understanding that they permit geographical tracking; or we browse online shops without realising that even the things we decided not to buy are being monitored and shape the content of our Facebook newsfeed or future searches on Amazon. The camouflaged nature of dataveillance legitimates it as a normality of living in the contemporary society and makes it almost non-objectionable. The lack of shock in response to Erdoğan's message is perhaps a manifestation of our collective acquiesce conditioned by these factors.

As big data has rapidly become a social concern, theatre and performance artists (among others) have become interested in the question of how they can make sense of the



pervasive and super-human scale of information structures, reveal the hidden data mining mechanisms for critical recognition, and challenge the ‘fixed populist imaginary that distracts attention from the larger political implications of the increasing pervasiveness of surveillance systems’ (Harding 2015, 137) In what follows I will briefly consider ‘mediatised aesthetics’ in order then to examine the ways in which *Karen* adopts this aesthetic paradigm to subversively engage with the culture of data surveillance and our position in it.

### ***Mediatized aesthetics***

The concept is based on two notions: mediatisation and info-aesthetics. The combination of mediatisation, borrowed from media studies and sociology, and the theoretical concept of info-aesthetics, focusing on the cultural forms specific to information society, is instrumental to the analysis of *Karen*. The hybrid notion here applies the sociological theorisation of contemporary culture to digital performance, and deploys some of the filters of info-aesthetics as a theoretical tool, yet, at the same time, expands its data-specific perspective on art and performance.

To elaborate, mediatisation ‘points to societal changes in contemporary high modern societies and the role of media and mediated communication in these transformations.’ (Lundby 2009, 1) The notion does not encompass every historical process in which media technologies influence society. Rather, it is a concept specific to the period since the late-twentieth century characterised by the pervasive presence and autonomy of the media as social institution and cultural technology that are ‘crucially interwoven with the functioning of other institutions’ (Hjarvard 2008, 110), and increasingly permeate individuals’ everyday lives. Mediatisation is directly connected to other social, cultural and political processes in the late-capitalist society such as globalisation, commercialisation, datafication and dataveillance. (Krotz 2009, 24-25) To be more specific, mediatised culture is fundamentally related to societies of control as it contains and refers to, amongst other societal subsystems, the media

as surveillance mechanisms and ideological technologies. Hence, the socio-technical processes of big data and dataveillance can be considered as a part of mediatisation.

‘Info-aesthetics’ refers to ‘emerging aesthetics and cultural forms specific to a global information society’ (Manovich 2008, 340 - 341) that aesthetically engage with the forms of information structures shaping our everyday lives and translate our info-rich existence and consciousness into forms that are compatible with our limited senses. Info-aesthetics focuses specifically on the idea that numerous aspects of everyday human experience ‘are converging around “information,”’ (Manovich 2008, 334), that our lives have become data-driven and transformed into data, and aims to explore the emerging cultural practices and aesthetics specifically in relation to the information structures and the socio-cultural environment they generate. In suggesting so, it shares some common grounds with mediatisation since the data culture and information technologies, which info-aesthetics consider with exclusive attention, are a part of mediatised society – of the ways in which media technologies as cultural, social, ideological technologies shape contemporary society and individual lives. Manovich highlights the exclusiveness of info-aesthetics and makes it clear that as a theoretical tool it does not suggest that the diverse forms in contemporary aesthetics are all related to ‘the shift to information society and the key role played by information management in the social, economic, and political life of contemporary societies.’ (Manovich 2008, 341) Other social factors such as globalisation, commercialisation or ecological thinking also play an important role in the emergence of new aesthetic languages. In line with its specific focus on information society and its cultural forms, info-aesthetics examines mainly digital and computer-based works in which data-processing is central to form and content, and ‘the use of computers for design and production give rise to new forms.’ (Manovich 2008, 342) For example, interactive data visualisation is a new aesthetic form, which uses and represents quantitative data to make sense of it. In *On Broadway* -an interactive installation by Daniel

Goddemeyer, Moritz Stefaner, Dominikus Baur and Lev Manovich- ‘a compilation of images and data collected [from the activities of hundreds of thousands of people] along the thirteen miles of Broadway that span Manhattan’ (Goddemeyer, Stefaner, Baur, and Manovich 2016) are downloaded, filtered and gathered to represent the twenty-first century city life, presents a new aesthetic vocabulary combining form and information.

Info-aesthetics presents a relevant theoretical viewpoint for *Karen*. Blast Theory’s piece uses data processing: *Karen* mines our personal data through the dynamic user interface of smartphone app and it generates the data report - a new information-based form and content that relates to ‘the new priorities of information society: making sense of information, working with information, producing knowledge from information’ (Manovich 2008, 341). Although my analysis explores these data processing mechanisms, it adopts mediatised aesthetics as the fundamental lens because it offers a larger socio-critical perspective on the connection between aesthetics and the question of big data, social control and the individual’s position in the ideologically regulated processes of dataveillance. Also, mediatised aesthetics does not only refer to works that directly involve data processing technologies as formal and thematic tools, but also looks at others that implicitly relate to the socio-cultural context these technologies have generated without having to overtly use them. While *Karen* contains some of the characteristics of info-aesthetics it does not seek to foreground ‘the aesthetic of the database’ as its central formal and critical concern ‘by which [, according to info-aesthetics,] the meaning is generated’ (Garassini 2005). Rather, it is more interested in investigating information technologies such as the smartphone as cultural and ideological technologies that radically shape our actions, thoughts and identities.

### **Karen**

Blast Theory’s piece ‘is informed by ideas around individual context finding and delving into people’s private lives through their mobile devices.’ (Chatzichristodoulou, 2017)

After the participant downloads the app, Karen contacts him/her (at sporadic times throughout a period of nine or ten days), and in pre-recorded video footages she talks about her life (for example, the breakup of her relationship, her new date, and so on). In these videos she asks each participant multiple-choice questions through in-app messaging, and this starts the participant's one-to-one experience with Karen. The user taps on the screen to answer these questions through which Karen subtly collects his/her personal data to then generate the personalised report at the end of their interaction.

*Karen's* interactive participatory design hybridises drama, computer game, pre-recorded film-based storytelling and personality questionnaire. The questionnaire is central to *Karen* as it forms the basis for the interaction between Karen and the participant. Whilst designing the questionnaire Blast Theory gathered and edited psychological profiling tests that the British military used to evaluate potential undercover operatives. The company also used the 'Big Five Personality Test' which identifies one's character based on the measurements of five personality traits: openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism. Blast Theory then embedded these questions and profiling models into *Karen's* plot structure. (Adams 2016, unpublished interview) Drawing on the questionnaires, used in recruitment and profiling by the British Military, and implanting it into the personal space of mobile phones hints at the connection between information/communication technologies and the surveillance and control systems operated by states and corporations. For example, Erdoğan's tactics after the attempted coup, based on his access to the majority (if not all) of the citizen's phones and his use of these technologies as propaganda tools, display the instrumentality of this personal technology in the maintenance of power and control. Our smartphones as a part of the information superhighway enable the 'free-floating control that replaces old disciplines' (Deleuze 1992, 4) of Foucault's disciplinary societies, and bring about an unbounded paradigm of control and

‘universal modulation’ (Deleuze 1992, 7). This everyday personal technology is constantly collecting data from individuals, tracking their interpersonal connections, locations, movements and so forth, whilst comforting them with the idea that they have instant access to information and communication with others as well as increased liberty to navigate cyber spaces.

*Karen* is a virtual theatre piece that draws heavily on gaming aesthetics as a tool to create an interactive social microcosm, as well as a recognisable setting with familiar features and rules. Blast Theory uses game design also as a political form to reflect on the power relationships through the organisation of relationships in the game environment. (Adams in Chatzichristodoulou 2016, 113- 114) In addition, gaming and surveillance have a ‘shared military history’ as in both ‘the practice of observation must become specialized and strategic’ (Hunter 2015, 185). This common background underpins the use of gaming as a critical and aesthetic instrument to question dataveillance by Blast Theory. Also, game design evokes neoliberal processes of *gamification* that are used widely by companies as selling strategies to ‘gather huge amounts of data, to track movements and behaviour patterns, to award points for deeds and tasks, and to compare them in social networks’ (Schrape 2014, 32). Unlike the emphasis on entertainment in game design, Blast Theory’s piece does not fundamentally aim for escapism or immersion that many games in the mainstream gaming industry offer. It combines drama with game design, and positions the participant both in the real world and the virtual environment, which is ‘perhaps the most important characteristic of virtual theatre.’ (Giannachi 2004, 11) Whether it takes place in a physical or virtual space, Blast Theory’s work is always ‘engaged with the idea of performance, the idea of a performer and an audience member having a live exchange or interaction’, (Adams in Chatzichristodoulou 2016,108) and challenges the boundaries between performance and spectating space, and between the real and the fictional.

*Karen* offers an inventive critical response to big data culture since rather than simply reacting against it and denying its tools and discourses, Blast Theory's piece repositions the mainstream applications of data surveillance and data mining technologies to understand and critically question our current mediatised, data-driven society and our position in it as individuals. In what follows I argue that *Karen*'s structure in its entirety works in a critical manner. Through the interactive form it constructs a familiar environment through the personal technology of mobile phone, online chat and gaming, the intimate context of personal coaching, and *Karen*'s friendly attitude which generate a sense of proximity, intimacy, agency and control. Once the interactive part of the exchange is completed, the participant can access the data report. In this part Blast Theory destabilises what it neatly constructed previously by revealing the acts of data mining that have been taking place while we have been *participating* in the 'innocent' artwork. This shift from the overt, affirmative representation of data surveillance, replicating its mechanisms and discourses, into its subversion, offers a powerful critical impact.

#### ***From representation to subversion: Mediatised aesthetics and Karen***

As is common in Blast Theory's works, 'audiences are never present as witnesses - they are asked to immerse themselves in an experience, take an active part in the development of a piece by performing certain actions, making choices, playing a game, making decisions that will shape their own and others' experience of the work' (Chatzichristodoulou 2015, 238). Likewise, in *Karen* the participants are 'as near [to the story] as possible' (Adams 2016, unpublished interview); they are *Karen*'s clients and confidantes with whom she shares intimate feelings and experiences, and from whom she gathers information about their lives, experiences, and behaviours. Hence, due to the interactive and participatory design, the users are not only 'inside the work of art, but they are operating it, possibly even modifying it, in real time, and being modified by it in return.' (Giannachi 2004, 8)

Our participation is central to *Karen* as it is only through the interaction between her and us that the app-performance could work. This kind of participatory, interactive architecture presents *Karen* as a non-hierarchical work and generates the idea that both the performer (and the makers) and the participant have agency in the creation and performance process. The use of interactive gaming form along with dramatic narrative allows for the idea that every time one answers the questions, one changes and influences the direction of the story. For example, at times, the narrative seems to branch into a number of different directions in relation to the information each participant provides, which reinforces the user's sense of agency, and of active and *authorly* control over the medium and the content. As we feel that we are influencing the app-performance through our personal phones, we assume we have a free, heterarchic position in *Karen*, and therefore, we feel comfortable to feed information into it. This aesthetic structure is reminiscent of how individuals in contemporary societies of control think in relation to 'the ultrarapid forms of free-floating control' (Deleuze 1992, 4), predominantly the cyberspace, as it provides people with the freedom to instantly access and create information, and connect with others around the world.

These freedoms are hard to give up or resist against. As users and consumers of new technologies we are somewhat mesmerised by the liberties, opportunities and services they provide us with, which turns these technologies into perfect data mining and surveillance tools. The connection between the participatory aesthetics in *Karen*, which functions through the interactive app design downloaded into the user's smart phone, and our mediatised lives, maps an aspect of media-saturated societies of control. The mediatised aesthetics here repositions the tools of data surveillance in a representational manner. It portrays the individual's position in relation to information structures and data mining technologies without reimagining the power dynamics within surveillance society by offering a crack in the mainstream discourses and applications of dataveillance technologies.

The positioning of the participant in *Karen* reflects the very nature of this technologically enhanced society of control in which surveillance is ‘by design, participatory’ (Morrison 2013, 5). In its various forms, ranging from online credit checks and personal communication interfaces to our actions on social media, new forms and tools of digital discipline are effective in multiple areas of contemporary society. They ‘demand our participation as citizens in the digital age, asking us to maintain certain standards of safety, mobility, communication, and, perhaps most of all, capitalist consumption.’ (Morrison 2013, 5) In other words, individual’s participation is a fundamental characteristic of mediatised surveillance society: participation is encouraged (if not required); it is rewarded, made convenient and inevitable in our current reality as we use digital technologies to travel, communicate with others, or perform commercial transactions. Discipline by participation has become so habitual and pervasive that the acts of surveillance easily escape recognition.

The personal and intimate context of life coaching and mobile phone - an extension of our personal selves – creates a reliable and recognisable environment as it resonates with the ways in which we connect with others through our small screens. Therefore, the familiar space of the phone and friendly attitude of Karen, which may sometimes feel rather intrusive as she asks invasive questions or overshares her life, create mostly a comfortable ground for the participants to share their personal information without knowing what is being done with their data. Ironically when Karen tries to invade our privacy by sending a message in the middle of the night or by asking invasive questions, we do not necessarily consider this kind of intrusion shocking. The explicit and hidden exploitation of privacy may be rather uncanny and uncomfortable for the participant; however, it is not an unidentifiable experience as we live in a society that is saturated with CCTV cameras, personalised Google advertising, Facebook stalking and which allows for our personal spaces to be accessed and invaded by political agents.



In this respect, *Karen* presents almost an extension of our everyday circumstances, and represents the normalised, mainstream structures of data surveillance, which we participate in often without clearly and critically understanding its implications on our lives. The representational architecture generates a false idea of authorship and control over personal data, while actually delimiting our agency. The participants can only intervene in the creative process when they are allowed to and within the strict boundaries of the given story and structure delineated by the multiple-choice format and mediated performance. For example, unlike producing variations of stories as a result of interactive design, which would give some authorial control to the user about the outcome of the story in a traditional game setting, *Karen* allows the participant to make only certain choices: ‘You can choose what tops *Karen* wears, you can choose the bracelet or the camera, and so on, but those choices are not pertinent to the story. [...] Your choice is not a key story hinge; it does not affect the plot in any substantial way.’ (Adams 2016, unpublished interview) Although the responses change from one person to another, *Karen*’s narrative ‘is the same for all responses you might have just given.’ (Adams 2016, unpublished interview) In addition, the participants are not aware of how the information they have shared is being and will be used or who will have control over their personal data. The participants, for example, do not know that Blast Theory stores their information ‘for up to two years after the participant’s last activity before delet[ing] all personal identification information relating to the account. This includes obfuscating any geolocation information.’ (Adams 2016, unpublished interview) This speaks to the ways in which personal data is collected and mined from individuals by governments and corporations without their conscious intention of sharing private information or without their full awareness about how the data can be used. It also resonates with our conscious consent to data surveillance structures in return of services and conveniences they provide us with, and with the fabricated liberties we obtained often unknowingly at the expense of our privacy.

Our interaction with Karen also pictures the current obsession with watching (stalking) other people's lives, violating their privacy, and with making oneself transparent to the eyes of all – consequences of the normalised and internalised perception of surveillance and sousveillance structures. As we watch and learn about Karen's life, Karen tracks and observes our lives. This bilateral, unproblematised exchange of information, even at the expense of privacy, relates to the populist imaginary of societies of control that conceals the underlying political agendas of surveillance. It also reflects 'the adoption and internalization of the notion that it is both moral and healthy to routinely render oneself transparent' (Harding 2015, 137) to the gaze of all, to be tracked and watched, and to watch others' lives at the same time.

The representational aesthetics - the mapping and portraying of the dominant discourses and workings of dataveillance in a mimetic manner without challenging them - is a part of Blast Theory's critical endeavour to destabilise our accustomed positions in contemporary society where we believe to have more individual freedom and agency over our lives than before thanks to new technologies. However, until the participant accesses the personalised data analysis, he/she does not entirely grasp the invisible machinery operating in *Karen*. The exercise of false impression of agency and control through the misconceived relationship between participation and empowerment is inherently political. It is a purposely-designed strategy that Blast Theory uses to then challenge the power dynamics buried in mainstream surveillance discourses and structures. Moving beyond the representational mediated aesthetics, which has reinforced rather than challenge the veiled power dynamics in surveillance culture, the data report twists the narrative, our role and perception by subverting and revealing: how data is collected from each participant with or without their conscious intention of sharing private information, how they respond to receiving private data

about Karen even at the expense of her privacy, and how the personal data is used to quantify an individual.

Following the one-to-one interaction with Karen, the participants receive a note on their screens: ‘What does Karen know about you? Find out here’ (Blast Theory 2015, App.),<sup>2</sup> the link sends them to the app-store where they can purchase and download a personality analysis report. This document is a personalised review, offering an analysis of one’s personality that is generated in accordance with his/her responses to Karen. The data report demonstrates how each participant would ‘measure on psychological scales from openness and neuroticism to emotional guilt’ (Blast Theory 2015, App.) and ‘how these factors were used by Karen’ (Blast Theory 2015, App.), highlighting how data is subtly mined from individuals and used to profile them without them clearly understanding the process. It is a conclusive and rather disconcerting remark on the datafication and quantification of a person.

The report to one’s surprise shows that Karen has collected a great deal of information throughout her interaction with the participant. Although one is aware of feeding information into the narrative, it is hard to predict how such information, which one tends to think as less substantial than it turns out to be in the report, would be used in personality profiling and echo the dynamics of the big data culture we live in. For instance, in one of the video-episodes Karen’s friend Dave, suspicious of Karen hiding something in her room, asks the participant whether he should enter her room and check her drawers. This is a significant point in *Karen* since, as I find out in my report, it is a factor that identifies one’s respect for personal privacy and relates to the acts of surveillance and sousveillance that individuals as well as state and corporations perform. As a result of my decision to enter Karen’s room, I am labelled in the report as ‘disrespectful’ (Blast Theory 2015, App.) to another person’s right to privacy: Dave’s ‘invasion of privacy is actually focused on you, not her. He wants your file. It is entirely possible that Karen is relaxed about him going into her room and that Dave has her

tacit - or explicit - permission to do so.’ (Blast Theory 2015, App.) What is even more unsettling is the statistic information the report highlights: more than half of the participants have encouraged Dave to enter the room and invade Karen’s privacy. (Blast Theory 2015, App.) This is a microcosmic reflection of our current social state as it relates, in Kelly Page’s words, to ‘the rise in our use of social and mobile media [that] are designed to facilitate our ubiquitous content sharing and sociability. With their use comes a responsibility in how we share about others, from family members such as young children to strangers like Karen.’ (Blast Theory 2015, App.)

The data report, as will be discussed below, is a critical instrument that foregrounds the veiled politics of big data which necessitates participation and normalises surveillance of others and self-disclosure as a means of participation. Furthermore, the data report, which is offered to the participant as an in-app purchase for £2.99, refers to the service- and benefit-oriented narrative of digital surveillance technologies that enables discipline by participation: In return for your personal data, we provide you with services and you gain benefits of convenience and efficiency. The fact that the report is offered as a personalised service relates to not only the disguised workings of contemporary data mining mechanisms, but also the myth of free information. It parallels the business practices of corporations such as Facebook, Google and Gmail that operate by offering a free service such as an entertainment social networking app or free data storage, yet at the same time use one’s personal data as a sellable product which we directly or indirectly purchase later on. *Karen* plays with the appealing idea of free entertainment, free artistic experience and free information underlying the big data and data surveillance culture that we perform in.

The report reveals the true implications of our participatory role in *Karen* by deconstructing the sense of agency, control, and responsibility intentionally fabricated in our interactions with her. It also destabilises the consensual representation of mainstream

applications and discourses of surveillance, and repurposes data mining technologies in a way that highlights their performativity. Applying Judith Butler's notion of performativity of gender to surveillance technologies Elise Morrison argues that 'the functional and symbolic aspects of surveillance society are the tools with which our relationships with disciplinary and desire-based systems of state and commercial surveillance are expressed, reinforced, and revised.' (2013, 18) Technologies and narratives of surveillance are performative for they subtly construct individuals as desired citizens and consumers by constituting a performance and rendering them active participants in these performative acts. In contemporary surveillance society we have a multifarious and 'a complicated position with regard to surveillance: we are at once producers, consumers, products, and subjects of surveillance across a range of interfaces and spaces of daily life.' (Morrison 2013, 10) The performative acts of surveillance assign our identities, shape our relationships and actions, and establish who we are without our intentional consent and beyond our control and conscious memory. We do not have a clear recollection of how these identities, thoughts, choices and actions are constructed because they are not only invisibly regulated, but they are also managed and 'stored in memory – in data banks – to which we have not been granted access.' (Harding 2015, 145) This, James M. Harding argues, 'is an amnesia of profound political significance because the systems that do remember, that compile information about us and that ultimately construct our identities also determine how we perform in society. Those systems make us surveillance camera players whether we like it or not.' (2015, 145) This bears the question how the performativity of surveillance and our amnesiac state and disciplined performances can be challenged, especially when we have become frequent users of digital surveillance technologies, most of our everyday actions are dependent on them and, relatedly, when it has become 'difficult to critically consider the risks of participation, let alone imagine alternative, resistant methods of usership.' (Morrison 2013, 6)

Drawing on Butler's suggestion that performativity also contains 'the possibility of a different sort of repeating, in the breaking or subversive repetition' of a performance (Butler 520), one can argue that the performativity of mainstream models and discourses of surveillance can be questioned and reimaged through destabilising their performances. *Karen* draws on the subversive performativity of surveillance in the report section as it repurposes data mining structures and tools in a way that reveals and critically reflects on how surveillance functions performatively and how we are (consciously or not) implicated in this process, which has been represented in the initial part before the report. Blast Theory's subversive intervention appears through the data report in which they explicitly use tools of dataveillance toward socially critical, disruptive and imaginative ends to challenge our habitual behaviours, thoughts and perception. It is this section that interrupts the acts of surveillance performed via our mobile phones, and uses the same technology this time to disclose the intricacies of these acts through which *Karen* has transformed us from bodies of flesh into bodies of data, from individuals into quantified subjects or 'dividuals' (Deleuze 1992, 5) that are infinitely divisible and transferable to data representations.

Our participation, which initially made us feel responsible and in control, is not merely central to the performative representation of surveillance society, but also essential for the destabilisation and questioning of the mainstream models of dataveillance as ideological performances. As one reads the report, one notices his/her own responses – her choices, thoughts, actions and emotions - in the analysis, parts of which one may disagree with or would not like to share with other parties. The sense of agency and control over our part in *Karen* turn out to be a false perception and a constructed performance, enabling the entire surveillance mechanism to work. The critical repurposing of data mining techniques, and the critical presentation of big data and our required implication in it do not suggest a rejection of digital technologies or culture as the fundamentals of contemporary societies of control.

Instead, *Karen*'s subversive performance disrupts the performative representation of data surveillance 'from within the sleek exteriors of familiar, everyday surveillance technologies, [and] create[s] tools with which participants can get *unfriendly* with state and corporate systems of control.' (Morrison 2013, 20) The repetition of normative technologies and context of data surveillance with subversion therefore allows the participant to reflect on her experience of surveillance through the same technologies yet, this time, with a critical distance to the habitual understandings and performances of surveillance. In other words, *Karen* defamiliarises acts and scenes of surveillance that have become customary and normalised and, hence, easily evade our critical consciousness. In this way, the participant is repositioned as a critical user with heightened awareness of the ideological machinery of information structures and of her performative use of them.

***Karen: Resistant aesthetics***

Hans-Thies Lehmann suggests that 'there is an insurmountable rift between the political, which sets the rules, and art, which constitutes, we might say, always an *exception*: the exception to every rule, the affirmation of the irregular even within the rule itself. Theatre as aesthetic behaviour is unthinkable without the infringement of prescriptions, without *transgression*.' (Lehmann 2006, 178) Through its mediatised aesthetics, which engages with new media technologies as well as the socio-cultural environment they have engendered, *Karen* challenges the mainstream narratives and applications of information technologies as surveillance apparatuses that often evade critical recognition or alternative modes of usership. Critical Art Ensemble (CAE)'s term 'digital resistance', which they use with reference to the work of artist-activists, is also applicable to *Karen* as it 'challenge[s] the existing semiotic regime [of dataveillance] by replicating and redeploying it in a manner that offers participants in the projects a new way of seeing, understanding, and [...] interacting with a given system.' (in Morrison 2013, 7) That is, the performative representation of mainstream data surveillance

techniques, tools and discourses in the interactive part of *Karen* strategically reinforces and portrays the ideological machinery and interests of surveillance structures. However, this is a strategic repurposing of these mechanisms in order then to subvert these dominant narratives and technologies, and to offer a defamiliarised perception and critical space for a different, afresh form of thinking about the implications, risks and concealed mechanisms of the contemporary data surveillance culture. *Karen* offers a critical interruption in the highways we think we freely travel through, and invites us to look through this crack to notice the machinery of control behind our user-friendly, convenient, and liberating information technologies.

*Karen's* aesthetic and critical design shows that allowing the spectator to participate, to directly experience, rather than merely perceive, the mechanisms of surveillance through the use of the tools and environments of subtle control is central to the questioning of our understandings of big data. In addition, the use of dramatic and theatrical elements, virtual aesthetics, game design, and data mining techniques in radically creative ways through the personal space of our phones subverts how mainstream surveillance technologies perform. The mediatised aesthetics in *Karen* puts forward a resistant performativity that presents an apposite critical and formal paradigm to map and respond to the data-driven surveillance culture and to translate the bigger-than-human scale of big data mechanisms to the scale of human cognition.

Some aspects of mediatised aesthetics such as the direct use of smartphone and app design can be considered in relation to info-aesthetics which aims to explore new artistic forms emerging in information society by specifically looking at the ways in which information (data processing) shapes the aesthetic forms we design and the methods we use to create these new forms. (Manovich 2008, 333-335) Info-aesthetics focuses on new artistic expressions that engage with and respond to how information is managed, manipulated,



processed and radically increased, and how our everyday lives converge around data. (Manovich 336) In relation to this, as a conceptual framework info-aesthetics suggests considering artworks that structure data as their form, content and container in order to make it meaningful. (e.g. *Inequaligram* [2016]; *Selfiecity* [2014]). Although *Karen* falls into this category in various ways and even contributes to the genre of info-aesthetics by combining the aesthetics of information society with dramatic structure and narrative, it offers something different, yet still related. The structure and performance of *Karen* suggest evident critical and aesthetic links to mediatisation and to its connection with other social processes such as globalisation, individualisation and commercialisation. For example, the relationship between *Karen* and the participant accommodates not only the changing means of interpersonal relationships that now function through data processing and data mining technologies; it also addresses their changing content and dynamics that are based on brief and rapid encounters, and produce, as Zygmunt Bauman argues, ‘virtual proximity’ - a superficial connection that is fast, easily consumable and temporary, rather than long-lasting bonds. (Bauman 2003, 62) Also, the positioning of the individual as data-subject most visibly in the report section reveals and questions the idea of contemporary citizen as ‘dividual’ (Deleuze 1992, 5). This, however, is not simply about the transformation of individuals into quantified subjects, but it also implicates the fundamentally related process of individualisation in the highly technologised late capitalist order that ties subjects ‘into a network of regulations, conditions, provisos’ (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2001, 7) and ideologically oriented information structures.

Accordingly, I argue that mediatised aesthetics as a critical framework includes info-aesthetics and offers to expand its scope to aesthetic formations that implicitly relate to information society even, sometimes, without the direct use of, or reference to, data processing and information technologies. This, however, is not to propose an all-inclusive

paradigm with a single logic, something Manovich carefully rejects in his definition of info-aesthetics (Manovich 2008, 333). Rather, it is to suggest an additional critical lens that offers a comprehensive view into our data-driven existence, subjectivity and consciousness, particularly in relation to questions of control, agency and power dynamics. Besides the info-aesthetics filter that concentrates specifically on information processing, mediatised aesthetics as a conceptual tool invites us to consider the multifarious mechanisms and ideological structures underlying information society, and connecting it to other aspects of contemporary neoliberal societies of control. This critical framework -a paradigm in progress- proposes to explore new cultural practices that address the question and implications of information structures as connected to other social processes such as individualisation and social isolation, yet without merely focusing on the shape of information or database as the central form that creates the meaning.

As I am concluding this article, I read on BBC News page that ‘[m]ore than 140,000 people have been arrested, suspended or dismissed since the failed coup [in Turkey]’. The country is still under a state of emergency, which has legitimised state-controlled and policed personal data checks (GBT- general data collection) without asking for individuals’ consent. These personal digital dossiers hold private information that the individuals themselves have no control over or full access to, while the state has an ultimate power over the data and has (sometimes deceitfully) used them as proofs for detaining and dismissing a great number of its citizens. In our gigantic global web, in which data surveillance has become pervasive, invisible and normalised, *Karen* becomes increasingly more germane and timely, and signals the urgency for further subversive creative interventions to challenge and transgress the dominant narratives of big data and surveillance structures.



## REFERENCES:

- Adams, Matt. 2016. Unpublished interview with Seda Ilter. January 15.
- Bauman, Zygmunt. 2003. *Liquid Love: On the Frailty of Human Bonds*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.
- Beck, Ulrich and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim. 2001. *Individualization: Institutionalized Individualism and its Social and Political Consequences*. London: SAGE.
- Blast Theory. 2015. *Karen*. <http://www.blasttheory.co.uk/projects/karen/>
- boyd, Danah and Kate Crawford. 2012. "Critical Questions for Big Data." *Information, Communication & Society* 15 (5): 662-679. doi:10.1080/1369118X.2012.678878
- Butler, Judith. 1988. "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory." *Theatre Journal*, 40 (4): 519-531.
- Chatzichristodoulou, Maria. 2015. "Blast Theory." Chapter 7 in *British Theatre Companies 1995 – 2014: Mind the Gap, Kneehigh Theatre, Suspect Culture, Stan's Cafe, Blast Theory, Punchdrunk*, edited by Liz Tomlin, 231 – 254. . London: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama.
- Chatzichristodoulou, Maria. 2016. "How to Kidnap your Audiences: An Interview with Matt Adams from Blast Theory." In *Interfaces of Performance*, edited by Maria Chatzichristodoulou, Janis Jefferies and Rachel Zerihan, 107 – 121. London: Routledge.
- Chatzichristodoulou, Maria. 2017 (forthcoming). "Karen by Blast Theory: Leaking Privacy." In *Digital Bodies: Creativity and Technology in the Arts and Humanities*, edited by Susan Broadhurst and Sara Price. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Couldry, Nick. 2012. *Media, Society, World: Social Theory and Digital Media Practice*. Cambridge, UK: Polity.
- Deleuze, Gilles. 1992. "Postscript on the Societies of Control." In *October* 59: 3-7,

<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0162->

[2870%28199224%2959%3C3%3APOTSOC%3E2.0.CO%3B2-T](http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0162-2870%28199224%2959%3C3%3APOTSOC%3E2.0.CO%3B2-T)

- Deleuze, Gilles. 2006. *Two Regimes of Madness: Texts and Interviews 1975-1995*. Los Angeles: Semiotexte.
- Foucault, Michel. 1980. *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977*, edited by Colin Gordon and translated by Colin Gordon et. al. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Garassini, Stefania. 2005. "Lev Manovich: The New Aesthetics of Information." *Domusweb*, June 22. <http://www.domusweb.it/en/art/2005/06/22/lev-manovich-the-new-aesthetics-of-information.html>
- Giannachi, Gabriella. 2004. *Virtual Theatres: An Introduction*. London: Routledge.
- Goddemeyer, Daniel, Moritz Stefaner, Dominikus Baur, and Lev Manovich. 2016. *On Broadway*. <http://www.on-broadway.nyc>
- Harding, James. 2015. "Outperforming activism: reflections on the demise of the surveillance camera players." *International Journal of Performance Arts and Digital Media*. 11 (2): 131-147. <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/14794713.2015.1084797>
- Hjarvard, Stig. 2008. "The Mediatization of Society: A Theory of the Media as Agents of Social and Cultural Change." *Nordicom Review*, 29 (2): 105 – 134.
- Hunter, Lindsay Brandon. 2015. "This is not a threat: Conspiracy for Good." *International Journal of Performance Arts and Digital Media*, 11 (2): 185 – 201.
- Khan, Nora K. 2015. "Managing Boundaries with your Intelligent Agent." *Rhizome Blog*, April 7. Accessed 29 January 2017. <http://rhizome.org/editorial/2015/apr/7/boundary-management/>
- Krotz, Friedrich. 2009. "Mediatization: A Concept With Which to Grasp Media and Societal Change." In *Mediatization: Concept, Changes, Consequences*, edited by Knut

- Lundby, 21 – 40. New York: Peter Lang..
- Langlois, Ganaele, Joanna Redden, and Greg Elmer, eds. 2015. *Compromised Data: From Social Media to Big Data*. New York: Bloomsbury.
- Lehmann, Hans-Thies, 2006 [1999]. *Postdramatic Theatre*, translated by Karen Jürs-Munby. London: Routledge.
- Lundby, Knut. 2009. "Introduction: 'Mediatization' as Key." In *Mediatization: Concept, Changes, Consequences*, edited by Knut Lundby, 1-18. New York: Peter Lang.
- Manovich, Lev. 2008. "Introduction to Info-Aesthetics." In *Antinomies of Art and Culture: Modernity, Postmodernity, Contemporaneity*, edited by Okwui Enwezor, Nancy Conde and, Terry Smith, 333-345. Durham, UK: Duke University Press.
- Mayer-Schonberger, Viktor and Kenneth Cukier. 2013. *Big Data: A Revolution That Will Transform How We Live, Work, and Think*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company.
- Morrison, Elise. 2013. "User-Unfriendly: Surveillance Art as Participatory Performance." *Theater*, 43 (3), 4-23.
- Schneier, Bruce. 2015. *Data and Goliath: The Hidden Battles to Collect Your Data and Control Your World*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company.
- Schrape, Niklas. 2014 "Gamification and Governmentality." In *Rethinking Gamification*, edited by Fuchs, Mathias, Sonia Fizek, Paolo Ruffino, and Niklas Schrape, 21 - 47. Lüneburg, Germany: Meson Press.

**Cited Websites:**

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-38883556> (Last Accessed: 28 January 2017)

<http://motherboard.vice.com/read/big-data-cambridge-analytica-brexit-trump> (Last Accessed: 28 January 2017)

---

<sup>1</sup> The translation of the text message is done by the author.

<sup>2</sup> The texts taken from *Karen* will be shown as ‘App.’ throughout the article. These texts include the in-app messages, videos, and the data report.