Privacy Experiments in Public and Artistic Spaces

This article focuses on the comparison of two phenomena: Memopol (2010) an interactive installation by Estonian artist Timo Toots (1982) and the National ID Card and Public Transport Card system currently in place in Tallinn, Estonia. These geographically specific examples are a small part of a larger global discourse on questioning the line between what is public and what is private. Artistic projects such as Memopol have reframed problematic issues that characterize our modern age of surveillance society and digital technology, while raising pertinent questions about the blurry line between what is considered personal information versus public information. Increasing advances in surveillance technology in both the public and private sector, as well as social and cultural shifts brought about by digital media have created more accepting paradigms about privacy. This perception shift has been communicated in artworks, which is an example of how the topic has entered the public sphere.

Memopol and The Obligatory Estonian National ID Card

Memopol won the Prix of Golden Nica in 2012 at the Ars Electronica Festival on Art, Technology and Society in Linz, Austria. In both Timo Toots’s installations, Hall of fame (2009) and Memopol art and technology, and issues on privacy versus public information are presented to the audience in an accessible yet provocative way. The projects capture generalization about contemporary fears and concerns, characterized by citizens of democratic nations finding themselves living in a surveillance society. Hall of fame and Memopol make this situation visually explicit and reformulate it ironically.
Hall of Fame was a prototype of Memopol, and was built around the use of the Estonian ID-card. The Estonian ID-card is a photo-ID card that contains a microchip, all Estonian citizens and permanent residents are legally obliged to possess such a card from the age of 15. Since Estonia's accession to the European Union in 2004, the Estonian ID-card has become the official primary identification card in Estonia. It is recognized as an official travel document within the borders of the European Union and the Schengen Zone. Signing legal documents such as contracts and bank loans remotely have been possible in Estonia since March of 2000, when the law was passed enabling the use of the Estonian-National ID card for digital signatures. The ID card is also used for authentication in Estonia's unique Internet-based voting program. Estonian citizens can enter their bank accounts, sign legal documents online and send the digi-signed documents via e-mail or use online portals with digital-signatures – eliminating the need for physical identification and manual signatures.

Timo Toots' interactive digital art installation Memopol is an apparatus presented as a machine that measures its user’s so-called digital footprint using their National ID-Card and password codes, to search the Internet utilizing private businesses and social networks (Facebook) along with various official national databases and registries for relevant information which it then visualizes using an animation sequence on a public screen. Memopol invites visitors into a dystopian world, where technology has unlimited potential to gather and store information about them – every detail of their life is known, from how many friends they have, to the final grades of their high school exams.

“Tooits’s fictional city Memopolis demonstrates controversial application possibilities and increasing degrees of digital control on the Internet. Liberated from secrets, since every expression of life becomes data, the citizens of Memopolis are perfect, absolutely transparent and kept alive by the flow of information. Data streams open up inexorable, untapped territories of the public and private spheres in order to anticipate and eliminate social defects.
Automated monitoring structures become higher moral authorities in the evaluation and regulation of actions and thoughts. *Memopolis* gives shape to the foreboding notion that modern technology, using data available on the Internet, already has enabled the realisation of the wildest fantasies of categorisation.” (Edith-Russ-Haus for Media Art, 2012)

*Memopol* has been presented at international exhibitions with different audiences and can utilize different national identification documents to tell stories about the people who possess them. Although it can be an interactive artwork, which functions with the audience and exhibition space, the project can also be interpreted as an Internet project, online artwork.

**The Estonian Paradox: How the Digital Age is More Invasive Than the KGB**

Public opinion and media discourse on surveillance and invasions of privacy varies from country to country, as different historical backgrounds can create different social and cultural contexts. Estonia was under Soviet occupation from 1940-1991, fifty-one years under the oppressive Soviet system and human rights violations by the KGB, left its mark on the small Baltic country. However, a culture of conspiracy beliefs and reading between the lines is mixed with a keen interest in information technology and the national pride associated with being an eState with eBusiness, eVoting and ePolice. (Government of the Republic, 2013)

Estonia refers to itself as an eState, where everything from voting in political elections to doctor’s prescriptions and taxes can all be done online. The surprising paradox is that despite living under harmful and dangerous government surveillance for fifty-one years, surveillance tools are currently much more implemented and accepted than they were during the Soviet occupation.

It has been acknowledged by the Estonian media that identifying technologies such as the National ID Card and the (free) Public Transit System card, have greatly increased previous
government capabilities of surveillance and potential conflicts of interest between the private and public sector and citizens. Many journalists have questioned the privacy threats of recording routine activities such as when and where Tallinn city residents use the public transit system. (Lõugas, 2013) Even more criticism has risen in the Estonian press and courts, due to the insecure storage of public transport users information that was demonstrated to be easily accessed (with security holes) and stored for several years. (Alas, 2013) (Jõesaar, 2013)

The repercussions of such findings will likely have an effect on those who are uncomfortable with the identifying and information storage systems currently in place. However, to what extent citizens will modify their behavior due to perceived privacy invasion have yet to be documented. Artistic positions and practices allow the public to question accepted solutions about public information and personal data management. Artistic experiment in the public sphere, such as Toots’s Memopol could be used as tests and sources of research into public behavior and contemporary habits in urban environment.

**Biographical Statements**

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Preliminary Biography


