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On politics and aesthetics: A case study of 'Public Secrets' and 'Blood Sugar'

ABSTRACT

This article presents an in-depth, theorized discussion of two database-driven new media documentaries, 'Public Secrets' (http://publicsecret.net) and 'Blood Sugar' (http://bloodandsugar.net) as case studies of hybrid forms of art, scholarship and activism. 'Public Secrets' and 'Blood Sugar' represent the first half of a series of works that are the result of a sustained collaboration with human rights organization, Justice Now, HEPPAC *(the HIV Education and Prevention Program of Alameda County), eighteen homeless injection drug users, and twenty women incarcerated at the largest female correctional facility in the United States. For both of these groups, injection drug users living outside the norms of society in the shadow of the criminal justice system and women trapped inside the prison system, their recorded statements are acts of juridical and political testimony. 'Public Secrets' and 'Blood Sugar' bring their voices into dialogue with other, legal, political and social theorists. The article explores how, in these specific cases, interface design constitutes a form of 'argument' (as writing does for a scholar), and user navigation functions as a form of 'enquiry' (a distillation and translation of the research encounter of the Documentary-maker). The author addresses the tensions and contradictions that emerge between the goals of theory and aesthetics and those of advocacy and activism.*

> If there exists a connection between art and politics, it should be cast in terms of dissensus ….
>
> (Rancière 2010)

Like many artists, I am troubled by a question – one that has become a kind of refrain – what is the political efficacy of art? This is not a question of criteria for the political evaluation of works of art – their correctness, their radicalism, their affective power or critical acuity. The question that troubles me goes beyond interrogating the power of representation. It is about the tensions and contradictions that emerge between the goals of theory and aesthetics and those of political activism. It is a question of how to re-imagine the political *and* the aesthetic, in tandem. To address this question will require setting aside the common definition of 'politics', localized in the state and reduced to the struggle for power, and the common view of 'art' as confined to the realm of the cultural (restricted from entering the space of power) and adopting, for the moment, the vocabulary of French philosopher Jacques Rancière. For Rancière, politics is not the exercise of power. Rather, art and politics each consist in the 'effects of equality that they stage' through 'forms of innovation that tear bodies from their assigned places and free speech and expression'.(Rancière 2010: 37–38, 60).

I do not pretend to any sort of analysis of Rancière's thought here. (I am not a Rancièreian scholar and that is not my brief.) I only intend to appropriate and interpret selected terms from his lexicon to construct a theoretical space in which to explore the question of the political efficacy of art.

I am much less interested in Rancière's analysis of the 'politics of aesthetics' – i.e. his 'regimes' and his critique of contemporary movements – than I am in his 'aesthetics of politics'. Rancière is actually quite sceptical of political art and wary of its 'schizophrenic movement' between the museum and its 'outside' (2010: 1919–22). It is what he allows art and politics to share – the notion of dissensus and the redistribution of the sensible – that I find useful.

> Art and politics each define a form of dissensus […] if there is such thing as an 'aesthetics of politics', it lies in a re-configuration of the distribution of the common through political processes of subjectivation […] The 'aesthetics of politics' consists above all in the framing of a we, a subject, a collective demonstration whose emergence is the element that disrupts the distribution of social parts, an element that I call the part of those who have no part.
>
> (Rancière 2010)

For Rancière, what defines politics is a particular kind of speech situation – when those who are excluded from the political order or included in only a subordinate way stand up and speak for themselves. For me, this defines the form of artistic work that I will call 'database documentary' or 'idocs'. Through this form of practice, I appropriate Rancière's formulation of politics and transpose it into the register of art, thus materializing a space of 'dissensus' – not a critique, or a protest, but a confrontation of the status quo with what it does not admit, what is invisible, inaudible and othered. I do not wish to make claims of political efficacy (as commonly understood) for database documentary, but instead to identify and describe a genre and method that can function as 'politics' in Rancière's terms – a politics that I believe has the potential to circumvent the intransigence of the state.

In what follows, I will use two of my own database documentary projects as case studies that demonstrate this premise – providing functional examples of the 'political' by 'staging equality' and enabling political subjectivation.

METHOD AND FORM

> The efficacy of art resides not in the model (or counter-model) of behavior that it provides, but first and foremost in partitions of space and time that it produces to define ways of being together or separate, being in front or in the middle of, being inside or outside, etc.
>
> (Rancière 2010)

'Public Secrets' (http://publicsecret.net) and 'Blood Sugar' (http://blood-andsugar.net) provide interactive interfaces to online audio archives of conversations recorded with incarcerated women and injection drug users. These are the first two works in a series designed to allow individuals from what Rancière identifies as 'the part that has no part', to testify to the social and economic injustices they experience in the context of a broad spectrum of public institutions – the criminal justice system, the prison industrial complex, the public health system, and the public education system.

In this work, my role is that of a context-provider. I provide the means, or tools that will induce others to speak for themselves, and the context in which they may be heard. I engage with groups of participants who live at the margins, outside the social order, and attempt to create a space for the assertion of their political subjectivity. The process of subjectivation occurs both in speaking *and* being heard. For injection drug users living outside the norms of society in the shadow of the criminal justice system, and women trapped inside the prison system, the statements they make, and allow me to record, are acts of juridical and political testimony. If amplified and contextualized, their speech can turn the capacity for empathetic response towards broader social and personal change.

In the space circumscribed by subjectivizing speech and transformative understanding, there exists a productive tension between the particularities of individual histories that are, in one sense, the most compelling aspects of narrative persuasion, and the force capacity of the collective voice. Where one voice, an individual story, is intended to stand in for a class of subjects, there is a dangerous and disabling tendency to identify the subject as a case of a tragically flawed character or unusually unfortunate victim of aberrant injustice – rather than one among many affected by structural inequality. When multiple voices speak, in a manner that is intimate and personal, collective and performative, from the same experience of marginalization, the scale and scope of injustice is forcefully revealed.

For example, before I started visiting the California Correctional Women's Facility (CCWF) in 2002, I held, on an intellectual level, a rather typical, liberal distaste for the idea of prisons but, like many, I had not seriously questioned my assumptions about justice and punishment. I assumed that those who were being punished had committed crimes and that by and large the punishment they received would be just. I imagined that cases of prosecutorial malpractice, racial bias, human rights violations and wrongful conviction were the tragic but rare stuff of investigatory journalism and documentary film. But after spending time at the prison – after meeting the women inside and, visit after visit, hearing one after another testify to the same injustices, the same

egregious, pervasive, human rights violations – the weight of the evidence, the repetition, the shared experience threaded through the vast amount of testimony, changed my assumptions and destroyed my complacence.

My goal as an artist is to provide a parallel of this experience to the public. My strategy involves addressing an issue, context or marginalized community as a 'site' (or scene or field) rather than through a story or individual narrative. I collect a significant amount of direct testimony from a 'site'. Then I design an interface structured in a manner that will both circumscribe and describe this 'site' of socio-economic and political experience as articulated by the participants. Rather than building a single road across that site to get from point A to point B (or the beginning of an argument to its resolution), the design maps out an extensive territory – say, 100 square miles – and the interface sets the viewer down within the boundaries of this territory – allowing her to find her own way – to navigate a difficult terrain, to become immersed in it, and thus to have a transformative experience. The interface and information design constitute a form of 'argument' (as writing does for a scholar), and a user's navigation becomes a path of 'enquiry' (a distillation and translation of the encounter through which the speech of the participants emerged.)

The data and interface are framed by what I think of as anecdotal theory (after Michael Taussig and Jane Gallop), which combines narratives drawn from my encounter with my interlocutors, annotated research and analysis. The passages of anecdotal theory, which can be found in the introductions and conclusions, as well as dispersed throughout the works, create a point of entry that allows the audience to become immersed in the 'subjective plurality' that is manifest in the 'site'. Taken together, the recorded interviews or conversations, the information and interaction design and theoretical framework, materialize the Rancièreian 'political', creating a space of 'dissensus' both for participants and for viewers – one that introduces new subjects into the field of perception. (Rancière 2007: 65).

DESIGN AND ARGUMENT

While my two case studies, 'Public Secrets' and 'Blood Sugar', are companion pieces that are very closely related in terms of content, participant-group, socio-political argument and visual identity, their underlying information architectures and resulting interaction designs reflect two significantly different types of interview content.

The 'site', or space of dissensus, produced through the project 'Public Secrets' consists of approximately 500 statements made by incarcerated women. Their testimony, taken from conversations recorded over a period of six years, reveals the secret injustices of the war on drugs, the criminal justice system and the prison industrial complex. These narratives of firsthand experience represent the kind of 'speech situation' that Rancière argues constitutes all the 'diverse historical instances of politics' (2010: 97–101). And 'Public Secrets' performs a further 'staging of equality', or disruption of the hierarchical status quo, by bringing the voices of these incarcerated women into dialogue with those of *other* legal, political and social theorists such as Giorgio Agamben, Michael Taussig, Walter Benjamin, Fredric Jameson, Catherine MacKinnon and Angela Davis. While this is a dialogue that I have constructed, by design, between interlocutors whose perspectives originate from very diverse social locations, for me all of their voices emerge out of a shared ethos and converge in critical dissent.

There are secrets that are kept from the public and then there are "public secrets" - secrets that the public chooses to keep safe from itself, like, "don't ask, don't tell." The public secret is an aporia - an irresolvable internal contradiction between inside and outside, power and knowledge. *Public Secrets* is an interactive testimonial in which women incarcerated in the California State Prison System reveal the secrets of the war on drugs, the criminal justice system, and the prison industrial complex. *Public Secrets* was developed in collaboration with Justice Now and with the support of *Vectors: Journal of Culture and Technology in a Dynamic Vernacular.*

As you browse through the piece, you will be presented with statements made by incarcerated women and others. By clicking the statement you can listen to it (external speakers or headphones are recommended) or read its transcript. Buttons labeled "More" or "View Connections" will allow you to follow the thread of a given statement to a new screen containing related content. By rolling over the strip at the left you can access the three sections of the project, or return to this screen.

This project contains strong language and graphic descriptions of prison conditions.

Click the "Enter" button to begin. Afterwards, you'll find an "Exit" here as well.

► MAIN MENU ►

PUBLIC SECRETS

by Sharon Daniel
Design by Erik Loyer

ENTER ►
TOPICS ►
WHAT YOU CAN DO ►
EXIT ►

Figure 1: 'Public Secrets' screen shot of splash page. The piece begins with a voice-over introduction that is intended to address issues of access and privilege – the societal inside and outside.

The atrocity that has come to be known as 'mass incarceration' is possible because it is a public secret – a secret kept in an unacknowledged but public agreement *not to know*. The public perception of justice – the figure of its appearance – relies on the public not acknowledging that which is generally known. This is the ideological work that the prison does. Feminist Legal Scholar Catherine MacKinnon has analysed the cultural pattern by which we are able to deny, ignore and assimilate atrocities that occur locally and globally on a daily basis – 'Before atrocities are recognized as such, they are authoritatively regarded as either too extraordinary to be believable or too ordinary to be atrocious […] if it's happening, it's not so bad, and if it's really bad, it isn't happening' (2007: 3).

When something is both too violating and too ordinary or pervasive to be acknowledged, the 'public secret' is in play. Its structure is that of an aporia – an irresolvable internal contradiction. 'Public Secrets' is built on this concept. The three principle branches of navigation, inside/outside, bare-life/human-life and public secret/utopia, are structured as aporia. Each aporia frames multiple themes and threads elaborated in clusters of narrative, theory and evidence. Together, they explore the space of the prison – physical, economic, political and ideological – and how the space of the prison acts back on the space outside to disrupt and, in effect, undermine the very forms of legality, security and freedom that the prison system purportedly protects.

In the interface, the recorded statements made by incarcerated women, and excerpts from theoretical texts, are displayed algorithmically in constantly shifting constellations organized by topic, theory and speaker. Instead of imagery, the interface is constructed out of quotes. Each screen or view constitutes a kind of emergent and transient, multi-vocal text. These text/views are framed by animated voice-over narration – in the introduction, a piece of anecdotal theory walks the
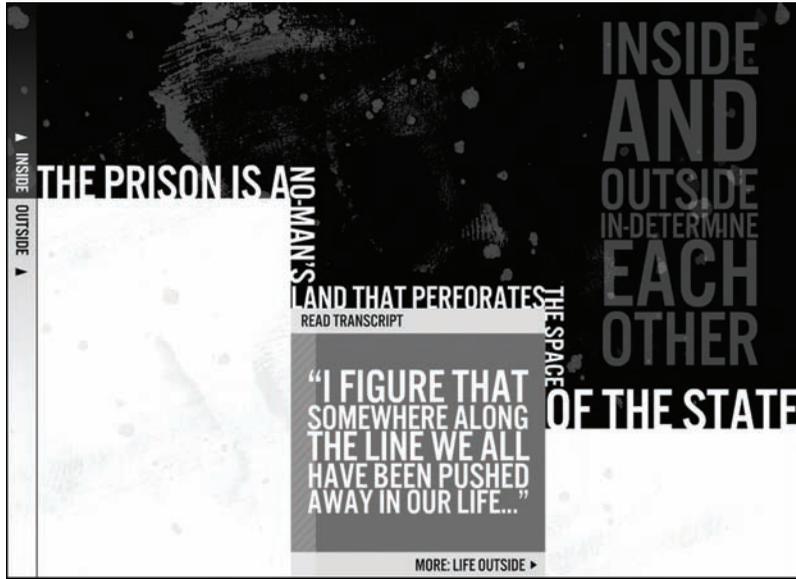
Figure 2: 'Public Secrets' screen shot. Each aporia is introduced in a screen view that is split horizontally between its two states – for example, as seen here, 'inside' and 'outside'. By rolling over a quote, viewers trigger its corresponding audio clip – clicking on the quote opens a new screen view – selecting a clip on the 'inside' half of the aporia screen view leads to a new screen view with more quotes related to 'life inside'.

viewer across the boundary between inside and outside, and in the conclusion a voice-over leads to an advocacy tool-kit titled 'what you can do'.

Editor Tara McPherson's introduction to the publication of 'Public Secrets' in the *Vectors Journal* describes her experience of navigating its interface:

> The design of the project – its algorithmic structure – calls one's attention to the shifting borders between inside and outside, incarceration and freedom, oppression and resistance, despair and hope. Through navigation of the piece, the fine lines demarcating these binaries morph, shift, and reconfigure. Rather, inside and outside mutually determine and construct one another illuminating relations between individual experiences and broader social systems.
>
> (2007, http://vectors.usc.edu/projects/index.php?project=57)

'Blood Sugar', the second work in this series of database documentaries, exposes the social stigmatization and resulting criminalization, of poverty and addiction, through many hours of conversation with injection drug users recorded at a needle exchange programme and HIV prevention centre in Oakland, California.

In contrast to the array-like structure of 'Public Secrets', which allows the women to speak collectively on topics that arose repeatedly in all of our conversations, the interviews in 'Blood Sugar' are kept intact and whole. This significant difference between the two projects in both interface and information design is due to qualitative differences in the nature of the interviews
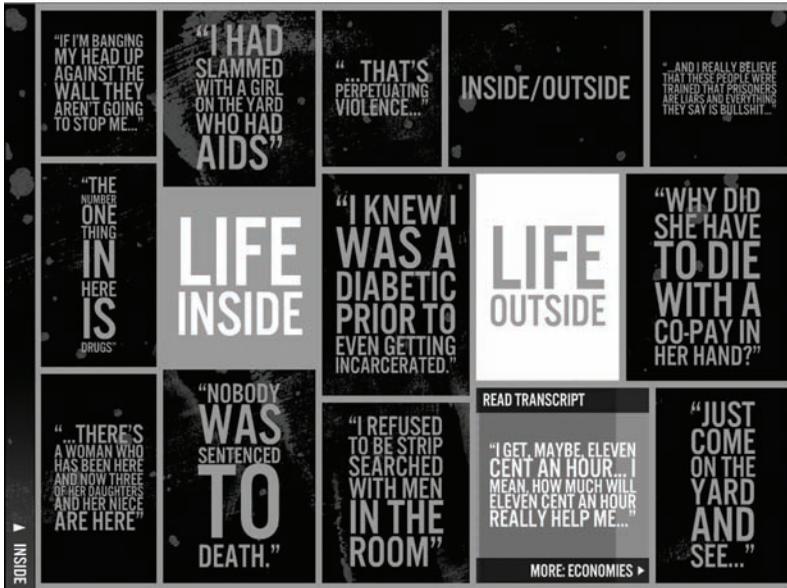
Figure 3: 'Public Secrets' screen shot. Screen view of 'life inside' topical array in which incarcerated women discuss their status as social outsiders and provide accounts of their own lives inside the prison. A panel at the top of the activated quote-block allows viewers to open a corresponding transcript while listening and another panel at the bottom with 'More: ____' leads to a new screen view. For example, each quote displayed in this view opens to a new view on a particular topic related to 'life inside'.

Figure 4: 'Public Secrets' screen shot. When 'view connections' appears in the panel at the bottom of a selected block it leads to new kind of screen space that accesses associations between items of content based on conceptual themes and threads.

Figure 5: 'Blood Sugar' screen shot.

themselves. The women who offered their testimony in 'Public Secrets' were, for the most part, highly politicized. They consciously welcomed the opportunity to join their fellow prisoners, speaking to a variety of issues in a collective voice. By entering the prison as a 'legal advocate', I was able to interview most of the participants on multiple occasions and in a confidential setting. Over time, I gathered considerable material, both personal histories and political opinions that crossed a wide range of topics in which all the women shared concerns.

In contrast, I interviewed most of the addicts whose voices are heard in 'Blood Sugar' only once. The setting where most of the interviews were held, during group therapy and education sessions at a harm-reduction-based social service facility, influenced the nature of our conversations. None of the addicts I met at the exchange presented the identity of the 'righteous dope fiend',[1] which is, very likely, the identity they commonly present on the street. On the contrary, each act of self-narration began with a kind of confession of weakness or disease. The messy details of each life history would then unfold according to the syntax and grammar of the disease-and-recovery discourse that is learnt in the type of quasi-therapeutic setting where we met. For the most part, my interlocutors did not frame their accounts in terms of social critique or analysis. Their focus was more on self-reflection than social criticism.

For this reason, I decided that the interviews should be available in their entirety as continuous narratives and that the interface should present each interlocutor as both a subject and a body. Graphically, each participant is represented as a vertical waveform or 'audio-body' and functionally each interview can be listened to or 'scrubbed' through in continuous, linear form. While complete in themselves, the individual 'audio-bodies' that represent each interview are linked together through what I considered as 'parasitic' connections revealed in their stories of pain, violence, abuse and oppression. These links allow the viewer to cross from one story to another to follow a thread of shared experience.

The space the audio-bodies inhabit and the way they are encountered by the viewer is structured in terms of both the social and biological construction

*Figure 6: 'Blood Sugar' screen shot. Viewers can select an 'audio body' and allow
it to play, zoom in and 'get closer' by clicking on it, or 'scrub' through to select a
new point in the interview by clicking on one of the quotes floating around it or by
moving the play head on the left side of the screen.*

of addiction – at the boundary of the skin. The metaphor for interaction is
the 'zoom', the idea that we must 'get closer', we must not look away, we
must, in a certain sense, pass through the looking glass – in order to see and
understand the realities of the lived experience of one of the most impoli-
tic, socially 'othered' – the street junkie. The interface is designed to draw
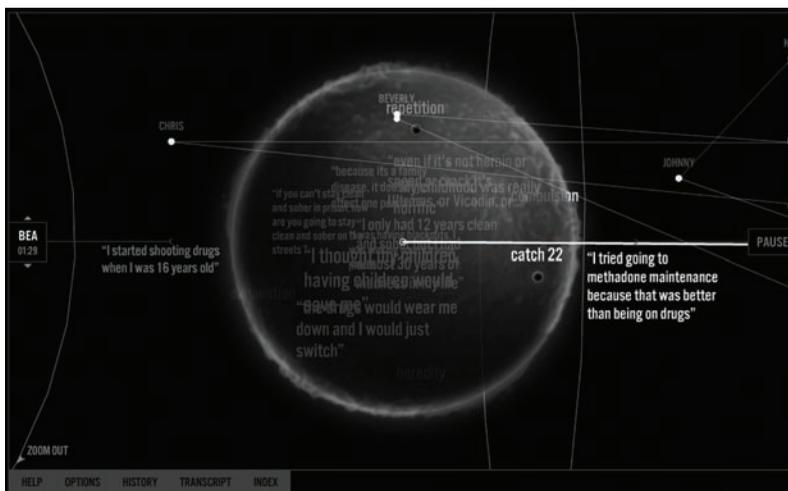
*Figure 7: 'Blood Sugar' screen shot. 'Parasitic' links appear as small black holes
(labeled 'abuse', 'despair', etc.) that float through the screen space once the viewer
has zoomed into an audio body and reached its 'nucleus' view. The names of
participants linked-to appear on roll-over.*

Figure 8: 'Blood Sugar' screen shot. Here the 'zoom' has penetrated the nucleus of the audio body which activates content that is focused on the biological experience of addiction.

you in – first navigating the external/social space of each participants' story and then gradually moving towards what is embedded in the internal, the biological – metaphorically penetrating the skin.

The interviews are framed by anecdotal theory through a series of 'question texts' and my own audio-body, which is seen and heard in the introduction and conclusion. The fourteen 'question texts' respond to a set of somewhat rhetorical questions – posed from the perspective of the enfranchised political subject – such as 'what do we hold against the drug addict?' The 'answers' to these questions carry the principal argument of the piece in the form of a narrative. The texts relate the story of my own transformative education –

*Figure 9: 'Blood Sugar' screen shot showing the author's introduction.*
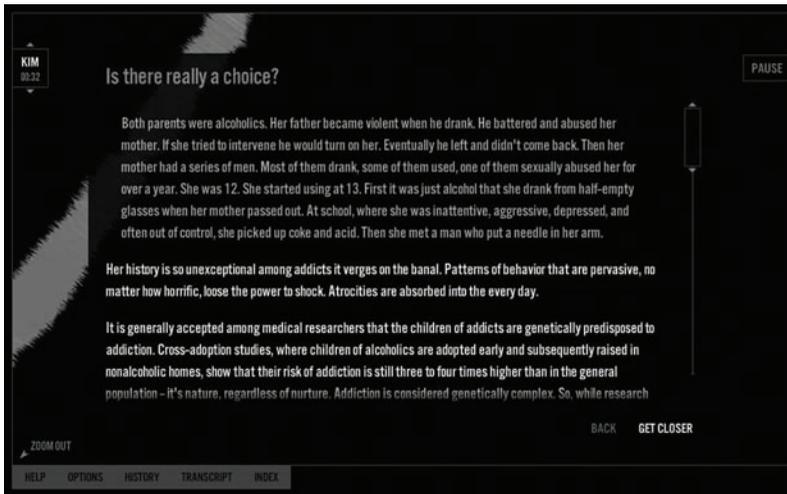
Figure 10: 'Blood Sugar' screen shot showing active 'question' text.

what I learnt about addiction through my encounters with addicts and my research into the neurobiology of addiction. They are intended as a point of suture or identification that should guide the viewer's education in parallel to mine. It is an education that I feel must be shared, across the socio-economic and political spectrum, to foster effective resistance to the criminalization of illness, poverty and the lack of comprehensive public health care – because, as the piece concludes, we are all living with addiction.

FICTIONS AND REALITIES

An interview is a performance of something true but not necessarily or always factual. It takes flight, lands somewhere between emotional truth and constructed memory, is always inflected by the context of the interlocution and the potential for misrecognition. I don't assume that the men and women who allowed me to record our conversations at the needle exchange and in the prison offered natural, objective descriptions of an unambiguous reality. An interview is always an affective encounter. The definition of 'affect' includes, 'assume' and 'pretend'. The interview is a 'fiction', as articulated by Rancière – not the opposite of 'real' but a reframing of the 'real' – a way of building new relationships between reality and appearance, the individual and the collective (Rancière 2007: 35–41).

The personal narratives of those trapped in poverty and addiction are a very particular form of 'fiction' in this sense. They resist translation into rational linear form – they loop and repeat – they are both horrifically compelling in their individual accounts of personal tragedy and astonishingly similar across the board. Addict's stories, especially, can be frustrating and incomprehensible. This is part of the nature of the disease. Their historical trajectories are not logical. They do not advance in a traditional narrative arc or resolve in a satisfying conclusion. To understand and empathize, to hear and accept, a listener must be moved beyond the logic of cause and effect and into the realm of affect. Taking affect and 'fiction' seriously may be the point where 'real' 'politics' begins. (Bertelsen and Murphie 2010: 2065–67).

CONCLUSION

What is the political efficacy of Art? Despite his insistence on 'aesthetic indifference' ('a film remains a film', etc.) and the 'aesthetic cut' (what separates 'consequences from intentions'), Rancière acknowledges:

> There is no 'real world' that functions as the outside of art […] There is no 'real world'. Instead, there are definite configurations of what is given as our real, as the object of our perceptions and the field of our interventions. The real always is a matter of construction, a matter of 'fiction' …

> (2010: 1967–73)

The configurations and constructions that database documentary, as an art practice that facilitates political subjectivation, allows constitute a field of intervention that maps directly onto and into 'politics', re-imagining and reconstructing the 'fictions' of the real. Such acts of subjectivation attempt to undo the status quo and implement the only universal in politics: we are all equal' (Rancière 2007: 86). But there is still the problem of the 'real' that is manifest in the operations of power. There is the difficulty of the material realities my interlocutors experience despite their political subjectivation – realities that are the result of structural inequality. To get to 'we are all equal' will require relocating politics, in a fundamental and material way, outside the logic of the state. Clearly, the state is not susceptible to the persuasions of art, or, necessarily, the politicized speech of 'the part that has no part', but if art can produce new political subjects who generate new 'fictions' of the real, it can change both the conversation and who is participating in it. Each event, each body, carries the affective potential for things to turn out differently.

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SUGGESTED CITATION

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Sharon Daniel is an artist who produces new media documentary projects that reveal human rights abuses across a spectrum of public institutions. She employs digital technologies, documentary practices and humanities-based analysis to examine how state institutions, social structures and economic conditions (from inequality in health care and education to racial and economic discrimination in the justice system) produce social injustices and undermine domestic human rights. Daniel's work has been exhibited internationally at museums and festivals including, WRO media art biennial (Poland), Artefact 2010 (Belgium), Transmediale 08 (Germany), the ISEA/ZeroOne festival (2006 and 2010), the Dutch Electronic Arts Festival DEAF03 (Netherlands), Ars Electronica (Austria), the Lincoln Center Festival (NY/USA), the Corcoran Biennial (Washington, DC) and the University of Paris I (France), as well as on the Internet. Her essays have been published in books including *Context Providers* (Intellect Press, 2011), *Database Aesthetics* (Minnesota University Press, 2007) and the Sarai Reader05, as well as in professional journals such as *Cinema Journal, Leonardo* and *Springerin*. Daniel has been awarded the prestigious Rockefeller/Tribeca Film Festival New Media Fellowship and honoured by the Webby Awards. Daniel is a Professor in the Digital Arts and New Media MFA programme at the University of California, Santa Cruz, where she teaches classes in digital media theory and practice.

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