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Armen Avanesian

DISCREET LOGO by Andreas Töpfer

Armen Avanesian¹ is an Austrian philosopher and literary and political theorist, who also operates as a post-contemporary artist by combining speculative questions in philosophy and art. The ongoing project *The DISCREET Agency*, initially created with Alexander Martos as part of the ninth Berlin Biennale, aims to collaboratively create a democratic and transparent intelligence agency. This artwork was prompted by a theory of data and information as currency that exposes a contemporary condition of imperialism which—as Avanesian argues—can be challenged at all levels, from the Academy to *WhatsApp*. As governmental outfits wage an attack on (rather than a defense of) its citizen body via technological surveillance, DISCREET aims to subvert this particular malignant neoliberal discourse, by operating as an intelligence agency for the

people under the new financial feudalism, while also responding to a discontent with the current state of political theory and inefficacy of most of contemporary political art. Fifteen selected agents met at the Biennale to participate in the founding of DISCREET. They broadcast daily activities which included the problem-solving *Insecurity Council*, the creation of the DISCREET Manifesto, and a series of ongoing DISCREET projects including the creation of a marketing strategy for the app *Signal*, promoting end-to-end encryption for mobile texting.

In this interview Armen speaks about DISCREET, how it functions as a platform for art and theory and the political stakes of this approach.

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How did the DISCREET Project come about, and what was the rationale behind it? What were your aims and objectives for art within this framework?

Armen Avanesian

Well, it started with the invitation from DIS, the curators of the Biennale. I tried to get some information about what the overall idea was, or a directive, or a sense of the general foundations and interests of the Biennale. Even though it wasn't too clear at the beginning, I realized that they wanted to do something different. I thought that, instead of organizing a theory conference about this or that topic, or organizing some new events together with this and that artist of the Biennale (the usual routines to which philosophers in the art-world limit themselves), I would rather intervene as an artist myself, and use the format of the Biennale to generate something that doesn't just represent theory or political theory, but that produces theory and produces different practice. I also tried to do something really site-specific. It became clear that we would be at The Pariser Platz

in Berlin, with the British and American embassy next door, both with the same instruments on the roof with which they tapped into phones in the Reichstag, etc.

We were interested in the hypothesis that data is the most important resource for the twenty-first century, and that today maybe the only ones who are capable of resisting big corporations like Facebook or Google or of maintaining their own agenda are intelligence agencies; but that unfortunately they're not really working with our interests in mind. Aware of my limitations as a theorist, whether political or otherwise, I wanted to transform them into an advantage, namely by building a platform where people are capable of gaining more traction on these issues. So that meant bringing activists, planners, policy makers, legal experts, financial experts, hackers, and hacktivists together for a certain period of time and providing the right kind of matchmaking, so that they can help one another.

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You raised a couple of things there in terms of the project being site-specific, but also mention the approach from the curators as an opportunity for you to intervene as an artist. Could you speak to your methodology of activism, use, or solutionism in the work versus an approach that is less didactic?

Armen Avanesian

We invited political theorists, hackers, and artists to give us their knowledge. We wanted to get away from the usual talk format, where people represent what they know already. Instead we wanted from day one to have a problem-solving agenda and practice. So its usefulness, in the sense of application or activism, didn't consist in providing a certain aura, but it was necessary to use this kind of transparency in order to stage the problem that we were

addressing (the inability to challenge corporation and the governmental monopoly on data). There's no point in working somewhere hidden for three weeks and then presenting the results to the audience. It was necessary to build, together with architect and theorist Markus Miessen, a stage, where our method of working was addressed and made visible for everyone. There was a certain theatricality involved, a performative element, but the setting also somehow triggered and catalyzed a certain way of thinking and communicating with each other. On one hand we were protected and talking amongst ourselves; on the other hand, people came in, and we were continuously filming ourselves and transmitting it online, so we were exposed. It was really important to get as far away as possible from an academic setting, and an academic way of talking.

So instead of just being nostalgic, instead of writing a paper on art, or a catalog text, or inviting an artist such as Simon Denny to give a talk on surveillance issues (which he would be perfectly equipped to do), it is an ongoing interest of mine to reinvent the relationship between theory and the art world. To reinvent the relationship between theory and practice it is first of all necessary to acknowledge the problem: none of us has enough knowledge—especially not an academic specializing in political theory. None of us as an individual really has enough knowledge to deal with these highly technical questions of programming and coding and so on. So it's part of the theory to use these artistic platforms, to do something unexpected, and to do something else in collaboration with others. And not just to play the art world's game because it's paying, right?

It was also a question not just of challenging myself, but of issuing a challenge to the Internet generation: it was clear from the beginning who was going to be in favor and who was going to be against

a biennale curated by DIS, but I wanted to push this generation a little further. Not in a negative way, or as if I know better, but rather by saying: you've got so much knowledge that the generation before you, and who are so critical of you, don't have. How can we collaborate in order to use this knowledge, for example, about image distribution, or about the Internet? How can we use that knowledge in a more progressive and emancipatory way?

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There are few things that I want to pull out of that. First of all, there is this problem of technological advancement being a social condition, something we're not able to deal with as individuals. Then there is this idea of "I'm not playing the art world's game just because they're paying". I'm wondering how you see this predicament as being something one can possibly escape? Lastly, if I understood this correctly, you see this project as a way of merging the skillset of an older generation of the academy and philosophy with that of a younger generation, those who consume and mediate life through a technological lens. Is that correct?

Armen Avanesian

Partly, but I start with the first problem. I do indeed think that we cannot individually solve the problems. Not only because none of us as an individual has enough knowledge, but also because nowadays local problems can only be solved on the global scale. Whether it's the problem of data and surveillance, or the problem of climate change, or economic problems, earlier ideas of smaller or ethical individual solutions are no longer possible. Small-scale "solutions" do not gain traction anymore in our highly complex reality.

So we need to shift from the local to the global. Of course it still makes sense, and is very important, to start from the local. But we've got to do the analysis and the

problem solving on the global level as well. Hence the idea at DISCREET that someone who's a hacker obviously needs legal expertise. But also someone who's working on an interesting artistic project might also need the help of someone who is a good programmer, and so on.

About not playing the art world's game, I'm interested in avoiding the usual traps. I mean, you always try and you fail, but it's the usual thing: fail better and try again. As I said before, the usual stereotypical way in which art and philosophy or political theory encounter one another is still the catalog text. And nowadays, more and more political theorists and philosophers teach in art academies. Yet I still see a very strong conservatism in the way in which this is done. I realize that this produces a kind of sadomasochistic, schizophrenic relationship between art students and philosophers or theorists constantly invited and being reproached for being 'so abstract'. We philosophers have to come up with more cunning, challenging, and intellectually rewarding ways of surviving in the art world than drilling Foucault and Derrida into art students' heads or teaching in this frontal way. Instead, my goal is to always explore and learn from art, but in a formal way. I would even say my interest in doing so is Adornian—which is not the same thing as using Adorno's work as a critical doctrine.

For instance, I'm interested in how an artist like Simon Denny uses the Internet, the new distribution of images, how he is a protagonist in what David Joselit calls an after-art condition. So that's what interests me about this generation. Why did DIS become big with ideas like using stock images and adding certain hashtags to them? There are certain types of knowledge that can and must be used in order to gain traction as a philosopher, a political theorist, and a political activist. In that sense I would not say it's necessarily about an older generation of academics and a newer generation of artists. Certain younger

artists and curators are simply more inspiring and challenging for me in order to come up with a new mode of theory production that is more adequate to this new generation of artists. I think the Internet and the digital revolution haven't properly arrived. "Post-internet" has been something of a failure: everyone recognizes that this could have been the beginning of a different distribution of art and different economic models. That simply hasn't happened. But there is also a failure to produce a new kind of art theory—that, also, hasn't really arrived yet. It's still old-school classic intellectuals claiming to know better and mostly producing highly moralistic and pseudo-political discourse about artworks or artists. I have an allergy to that.

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So what can the art world essentially learn from DISCREET? And I ask in reference to your decision to work in the art world in this particular way,—I'm thinking specifically here about an approach to merging of theory and practice. You've commented in the past that the art world can be a fun, experimental place, suited to this approach, but I'd add that it can also be unfairly privileged as there remains a palpable gap between what the art world talks about and what it actually practices on an infrastructural level.

Armen Avanesian

It was not a project meant to teach the art world something. The challenge is: What does it mean to produce theory for an art event that extends over weeks and weeks, if not to reproduce the old formats of theory seminars and conferences where people fly in and out only to repeat what they have already said many times before? Well, maybe actually that's something the art world, or the curators who invited me, could learn: that you can organize an event, relatively inexpensively, that could generate a certain momentum and traction, exploiting the fact that there is a constant flux of people coming in and looking and

watching. There's a performative element to it, but for me what's much more important is what philosophers and theorists can learn from a new attention economy within the art world. People now just look at art in a different way; and they might also look at theory in a new way. Philosophy and theory has to adapt, for better or worse, to a new situation where if you do really interesting work it's increasingly unlikely that you will survive in the ivory tower of a university. Hopefully, the audience learns something too, becoming aware of certain things that we were able to inform them about in a different way. And finally, it was the agents that participated in the project who formed the agency. We tried to educate, to train, to instruct. They learned something and I learned a lot too. So it was a three-week hyperstitional² training program to build a institution that is both fictional and real, and to educate and form agents that would hopefully, after that, start working or continue working in a different way.

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I would like to talk about the *DISCREET* film, and the humor that comes out of it. There's a conversation that occurs in the film between yourself and an actor playing the DIS curator where you make fun of your parents' incomprehension of your actions in the art world, and how they would like for you to have a 'real job', which is an insider's joke, a fairly common experience for many of us.

Also, there is a spectrum here in terms of identifying who your audience is and, I guess, what I interpret as an exposure of current political stakes for the left in light of recent post-election shocks, in the wake of which the left, or an academic left, or indeed an art world that speaks only to itself, came under fire. Did you see humor and satire as an entry point into this contradictory paradigm?

Armen Avanesian

The project of *DISCREET* works in a self-

entitling but also hyperstitional way. The film worked with the irritation, the provocation of seriously wanting to create an intelligence agency, rather than following the common left reflex of imagining a perfect world, a utopian world, where it wouldn't be necessary to have an intelligence agency any more. So, against this, we came up with this irritating idea—irritating not only to the left, but also to conservatives, or to anyone with a very reasonable mind. In terms of the political, humor is very important to approach something that seems impossible. What we suggested was a kind of naïve provocation: that maybe we need more neoliberal competition, and a free market of intelligence agencies.

According to Deleuze, there are only two ways to think the law, through irony or humor. Specifically, humor is not only a way of understanding the law, but also a way of being able to fight it. It involves over-exaggerating the law so that you can see how it works and how it might collapse, by stretching it to its limits. The film we did with Christopher Roth, parts of which were acted as a script, was spontaneously created by one of the agents. Therefore we decided that this should be part of the film. The film project, like others before it, should play on several levels. It's necessary that something remains in dialogue with and reflects upon the whole agenda—but from a different perspective, not just from a kind of representational documentary perspective. Also, what I liked a lot about working with Christopher already when we did the film *Hyperstition*, is that the film doesn't become a representational or documentary medium. Instead, his camera is there before, during, and after the event, always ready to afterwards fictionally change the reality that happened. It's the hyperstitional methodology inspired by CCRU (Cybernetic Culture Research Unit) and which was also employed for DISCREET: fictional entities becoming real, from the future towards the present.

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So it kind of falls into a para-fictional framework—like the satire work of the Yes Men, speaking to concepts of performance and of what is plausible.

Armen Avanesian

Partly, because the goal is not just to produce a certain awareness, but also to investigate this increasingly unclear relationship between fiction and fact. What's really at stake today is whether we accept, to a certain degree, that fictional elements can become real, that the ontological consistency of our reality can be described as hyperstitional. We haven't yet learnt to deal with this new consistency of our reality in a progressive way. We only see the horrible downsides and negative effects—*Breitbart* and the *Cambridge Analytical* and various other paranoias. That's why I think this concept of hyperstition is very helpful and why I try to use it, expand it, and push it in a progressive direction. I'm interested in fiction becoming real from the future, but as something that we have to learn if we want to have an impact, if we want to gain traction, in our reality, in politics, in art, anywhere, intellectually. We will have to learn to deal with this new speculative temporality and this hyperstitional consistency; we can no longer separate fiction from fact so simply. This is not the same as a postmodern kind of "everything goes" or "everything is the same" or "everything is just simulation" kind of idea. It's much more: much more real and much more dangerous.

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Some of the skepticism that I've encountered from an American art academy in regard to hyperstition (and its relationship to a Trump discourse) is that it sanctions a flattening approach to identity politics and, subsequently, the concurrent rise of the populist Right. That's a vast oversimplification, but it's something that comes up in the micro vs. macro, local vs. global discourse surrounding strategies for

leftist resistance. Could you speak about how DISCREET addresses this concern as a hyperstitional project?

Armen Avanesian

First of all, I think it's a false distinction, a kind of twentieth-century distinction, even though I might not get all the nuances. I don't see identity politics as a hindrance or an obstacle to real politics. So for me there is no either/or. What I do see is a necessity to understand to what degree our identities are a result of technologies, and to what degree certain phenomena such as racism are the result of a specific political economy. The question is how you update academic work that thinks that it is political when it absolutely no longer has any traction. That's why, in my work as an editor, I constantly try to build bridges between unnecessarily antagonizing discourses, like editing a book on accelerationism with post-operaist thinkers, or one on technofeminism including xenofeminism as well as Haraway and Braidotti. The same goes for my own books: as in the project of *Speculative Poetics*, which from the beginning argued against the simple distinction between *either* speculative ontology *or* relativist language philosophy. Or take for example the book I wrote with Anke Henning on *Metanoia* (forthcoming with Bloomsbury), which has the subtitle *A Speculative Ontology Of Language, Thinking, and the Brain*. Obviously these things take time to be read and understood, and as a philosopher—especially as mostly writing in German and having to wait for ages for translations to appear—I have to wait until the dust settles and we have a clearer picture, beyond the unnecessary and counterproductive polemics. That's the price one has to have to pay for working or doing projects or simply surviving in the art world. But what other option is there? To return to the traditional academic formats? Not really.

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Finally, what is the future of the DISCREET

Agency? Can you describe the reality of what occurred in the project, producing affect?

Armen Avanesian

DISCREET continues in various ways. In the mission statement for DISCREET, which I worked on with others towards the end of and after the Berlin Biennale, we stated that we wanted to continue working as a group. But beyond that, it has had a big impact on the research of individual agents, as individuals, but also in the way the group works together on joint projects, to provide a deeper understanding of this alternative intelligence agency. Furthermore, it was and is important for us to find out who is the addressee, to provide information that leads someone to act in a certain way. This brings me to another way in which DISCREET will continue—as part of my own research, which aims to find out what the new sovereignties are in the twenty-first century. I just published a book in German, *Miamification*, feverishly written during an artist residency in and around Miami during the US election. The book simply continues to work on or answer questions that were raised during DISCREET.

You mentioned the Trump trauma. I just came back from Moscow a few days ago. There is this very interesting proximity between Trump and Putin, and if you look at it from the point of view of political theory and sovereignty and the transformation of the nation state, then it could be said that it should not be any surprise that Putin is one of the richest individuals in the world, that the Trump government is made up of a not unsimilar group of mostly male oligarchs. What we see there is a kind of neo-cameralist transformation of what we until recently believed was a liberal democracy.³ The truth is that we now live in a kind of governmental situation that understands the state as a company. So the state is run like a company, and you can hire and fire people according to how you feel. This is a radical transformation of our political

economy, one that may have taken place some time ago but which we are only now able to see clearly. It is undermining what we understood as democracy. And I think that here we have a blueprint for future governance. During DISCREET, I learnt that as a political theorist I have to look somewhere else. I have to understand new modes of governmentality. It's not just about a failure of former sovereign nation states, but about a transformation of how they work. States themselves build offshore structures⁴, free zones, different zones of legality, bureaucracy—they're not just a victim of these developments, they are the ones pushing them, they have a certain interest and they are also gaining from it. So it's these zones that DISCREET somehow moves towards.

FOOTNOTES

- 1 Avanesian is the author of several monographs (*Irony and the Logic of Modernity* (Berlin: DeGruyter, 2015), *Speculative Drawing* (with Andreas Töpfer) (Berlin: Sternberg, 2014), *Present Tense: A Poetics* (with Anke Hennig) (London: Bloomsbury 2015), *Metanoia. Ontologie der Sprache* (with Anke Hennig) (Berlin: Merve, 2014, forthcoming with Bloomsbury), *Overwrite: Ethics of Knowledge—Poetics of Existence* (Berlin: Sternberg, 2017), and *Miamification* (Berlin: Merve, 2017). His work has been translated into various languages, and he is Editor-at-large at Merve Verlag as well as a founder of the research platform *Speculative Poetics*. He has taught at leading institutions including Yale, Columbia, and the Free University, Berlin. His film work includes *DISCREET* and *Hyperstition* (in collaboration with Christopher Roth). ↩
- 2 A term originally coined in the 1990s by the Cybernetic Culture Research Unit (CCRU), the definition of 'hyperstition'

has arguable evolved in recent years. Hyperstition performs the cannibalizing characteristics of capitalism, taking the premise that the future (as opposed to the past) is a way of understanding our current condition. Hyperstition refers to hyperspeculation as a proposal for realism. It is a term that recognises the dynamics of late capitalism as predominantly financial, and as operating through the speculative technology of an algorithmic superstructure that evidently sees repetitive collapse and crisis as its by-product. Hyperstition describes the methodology of late capitalism, embracing the point of view of capital according to which the adoption of hypothetical perspectives enables a transformation of the environment. Through the lens of technology, hyperstition articulates an approach to the current leftist crisis occasioned by the failure of what Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams call “the folk politics of localism, direct action and relentless horizontalism” pitted against a hyperbolic approach to excess (see Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams, “Manifesto for an Accelerationist Politics” (2013), in Robin Mackay and Armen Avanesian (eds), *#Accelerate: The Accelerationist Reader* (Falmouth and Berlin: Urbanomic and Merve, 2014), 354) . ↩

- 3 A Neocameral “neostate” is not owned by its residents *or its agents*. Its “monarch” (or “CEO”) is *an executive appointment*. ↩
- 4 “Together with one agent whom I specifically invited because of her expertise on the topic, Kathleen Ditzig, and others like Victoria Ivanova, I am currently preparing another project related to related problems” ↩

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TAGS