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Study of a Movement

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Study of a Movement is an artistic research project that attempts to create a multi-channel video installation in which viewers will be able to observe police violence in social protest in different reframing experiences. The project will consist of three different forms of moving-images: 1) the original video documentation overlaid with AI-generated skeletal animations; 2) the secondary documentation of performers reenacting the original movement; and 3) the tertiary video rendering of the performance through motion capture. By creating a diverse visual interpretation, this project aims to generate for viewers an experience of violence in social protest in which race, gender, culture, class, and geography are decentered. By applying AI motion trackers to the footage, one can see how the machine understands embodied movement in twisted social confrontations. At the core, this project asks, "Does the AI even care?" Furthermore, by juxtaposing all the aforementioned visual components, this project bridges the gap between AI training (understanding) and body training (teaching) of human interaction.

Description

The *Study of a Movement* project contains three sets of videos. The first is a collection of AI motion tracker analysis of violent police footage gathered from social media (Fig. 1). The second is documentation of performers reenacting the found footage (Fig. 2). Finally, the third type consists of animation of the performers' bodies from the reenactments of the footage (Fig. 3). The original footage will include street fights, protests, as well as confrontations between the public and police, with the aim of comparing and analyzing such social inter-actions. In addition, I will incorporate a series of animations by using motion capture of performers reenacting the offensive moves in the street fighting and protest recordings. The final output forms a third and important aspect of this project where the motion-captured characters are stripped of their original cultural and operational significance.

Fig. 1. AI motion tracker analysis of footage.
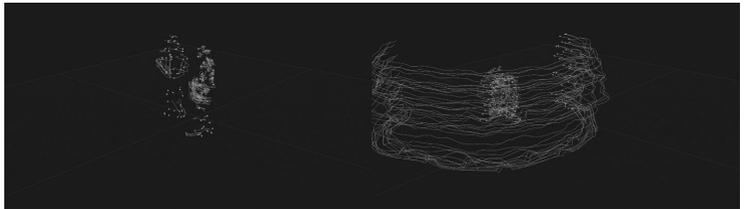

Fig. 2. Docume.ntation of re-enactments.

Fig. 3. Mocap animation of re-enactments.

It is essential to point out that the elements of this project will be drawn from the content of videos gathered from social media mainly focused on social unrest. While the camera is currently the main tool for recording the truth, the reality is that this 125-year-old device currently acts as a politicized apparatus rather than a device for the multitudes. Thus, it rarely captures necessary images. Among the thousands of documentary and fictional images, these are the fleeting moments and seconds that capture the brutality of regimes, the atrocities of usurpers, and the slaughter of conquerors. As an example, there is a picture of a twelve-year-old Palestinian boy, Muhammad al-Durrah, lying in his father's arms, stuck in the middle of a military confrontation in which he has killed. Another example is the dismal glance of a teenage girl looking at the Nazi film camera before she was taken to a death camp. In general, the protest images that are recorded and broadcasted by people on social media look similar to the above examples. However, there is a fundamental difference: they were both recorded by those who were not in danger. The Muhammad al-Durrah video was captured by a France 2 cameraman and the film about the death camps was made by an SS cameraman. In contrast, in the protest recordings, those who record the images are just as endangered as the people in their frames.

It is usually coincidence and fate that captures moments like the protests as if they were the reality itself that came to the lens. The first-person intermedia figure quality of the footage creates a sensory aesthetic in which the audience could grasp the notion of "we, the people" through the depoliticized lens of the person inside the location of oppression. On one level, by putting all this AI-analyzed footage on a loop, I will try to challenge the audience's notion that we are unable to watch this documentation many times and yet have their authenticity increase every time we watch them. On another level, I attempt to visualize a simulation of an AI training algorithm that has a repetitive environment.

Everyday Street Fight as Preparation for Future Revolution

The primary idea of this project came to my mind when I was doing an art residency in Mexico City in the summer of 2018. At the introduction of the residency, participants were strongly advised to avoid visiting the Tepito barrio as it is the most dangerous neighborhood in Mexico City. Tepito, as we have been told, is a region that is controlled by its inhabitants and where police are not welcome. My curiosity to explore Tepito seduced me to visit the region and none of those words could stop me. Tepito is not far from the Zocalo where traditionally protests and marches have occurred often. It is a region with numerous outdoor markets in which inhabitants trade their wares. All residents collaborate with

each other to survive and to resist. Tepito is also known as the birthplace of famous Mexican boxers and fighters. It is the place in which people train their bodies as their only tool to protect their land from the invasion of rulers.

Cordoned off zones are part of the contemporary globalization of cities that can exist in any country. My multichannel video and sound installation project, *Invisible Presencea*, focuses on a similar situation as in Tepito, in an unnamed neighborhood of my hometown, Kerman, Iran. Similar to the inhabitants of Tepito, this unnamed region has elected to occupy a piece of land due to poverty and circumstance. The squatters built their homes and businesses there, finding their own sources of electricity and water. Eventually, the leaderless group persuaded the local government to recognize them as an independent community. During a very brutal confrontation, the inhabitants forced police to leave their region and destroyed the police station.

Comparing Tepito's situation with the neighborhood in my hometown, we realize that they both function and act in a similar way. While they are both tagged as a dangerous, unsafe, and violent zone, we might see them as alternative and prototypical independent zones in the middle of neoliberal urbanized cities. These two neighborhoods, known as pseudo-suburban regions, are two symbols of resistance in the global westernization phenomena. All the stories around these two neighborhoods, particularly hearing about the way people train their bodies to protect their region from the state invasion, made me think differently about street violence. It seems that increased violence in urbanized regions becomes an unconscious method of self-training for future conflict between the rulers and the multitudes. In other words, when people are frustrated by living under corrupt regimes, they spontaneously shift their social movements to internal wars.

Urban theorist Mike Davis in *Planet of the Slums* (2006) says slums are like "volcanoes waiting to erupt" and that their explosion might herald the emergence of "some next, unexpected historical subject" carrying a "global emancipatory" project. Other social thinkers, such as Jo Beall in *Cities, terrorism, and Urban Wars in the 21st century* (2007) and Dennis Rodgers in *Slum wars of the 21st century* (2009) view the spectacular gang violence in Latin America as representing the response of the dispossessed to their excluded status. Gangs, in fact, correspond to vanguard forms of what James Holston calls "insurgent citizenship" (2008), attempting through violence to carve new spaces for possible alternative futures within the context of their wider exclusion.

Furthermore, Lonnie Athens, a senior research criminologist at Georgetown University Law Center has developed a theory of violent socialization or, as he terms it, "violentization" (2004). In his research, he believes violentization is a phenomenon rooted in social experiences. He describes the process of passing through violence in four stages: 1) brutalization, 2) defiance, 3) dominance engagement, and 4) virulence. In these four stages, he discusses how an individual goes from being a suppressed person to a suppression tool.

As part of analyzing artworks with the same concept, it is necessary to talk about *Real Violence* (2017) by Jordan Wolfson, which was shown in the 2017 Whitney Biennial. In the controversial work, the viewer puts on a VR headset and sees a character bashing in another man's head, to the point where you cannot tell if the victim is alive. During the Q&A section of Wolfson's conversation around this artwork with Rhizome's assistant curator of Net Art and digital culture, Aria Dean, a lot of challenging questions arose regarding the relationship between violence, gender, race and age which the artist failed to fully answer. In contrast to this art project is Autumn Knight's video art called *Instructions for Fights* (2017). It is a documentation of a performance rehearsal in which Autumn Knight and Chelsea Knight took part while preparing for a live performance at the New Museum in NYC in 2015. It shows how the behavior of the instructor could be different in relation to the gender and race of his pupils.

A Prototype for Deidentification of the Violence

By approaching street violence and its relationship to protest as a social phenomenon this project is aiming to answer these questions:

Are the perceptions of violence in social protest still experienced in terms of race, culture, class, and geography?

Will this stripped-down version allow audiences to form new perceptions of violence and its underpinnings?

By removing all the identity elements from the gestures, this project aims to generate a cross-cultural understanding of violence and protest. In addition, the documentation of the reenactment and reaction of performers during the production phase of the project played a very significant role. Reenactment of performers during the motion capture process will happen in a situation in which performers will review each footage several times to mimic the movement of people. All the conversations with the performers and their ability or disability

to mimic the content of the footage aims to challenge the notion of how much the interpretation of the social situation might change during the reviewing and reenactment of it. That is to say, I believe that the performers who react to these acts of violence and brutality will themselves become part of this video installation. Contrary to popular belief that art is a means of escaping the present reality, I seek to open people's eyes to their present state through these objects and situations. By arousing the performer's senses and directing them into emotional reactions, they will be subjected to the brutal crimes of sovereigns.

Summary

All the elements of the *Study of a Movement* video installation project are going to be combined together to create a single web page video installation in order to represent a prototype in which the viewer has the chance to have different socio-political interpretations. By putting together AI-analyzed found footage from social media, along with the motion capture animation of their reenactments, this project invites the audience to reconsider how they process and interpret the actual recorded violence. At the same time, viewers have the opportunity to shift their eyes from the images in which they are able to recognize each element of the images such as police, people, buildings, and gears, to the animated reenactment images which represent the same gestures without geography, race, gender, and gears. Furthermore, by applying an AI motion tracker to the footage, this project leaves the audience guessing as to whether or not machine vision and prediction will influence the future evolution of social systems in general.

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