Shadow and Identity: Celine Latulipe and Annabel Manning's "Interactive Surveillance"

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While the immigration debate gets louder, uglier, and seemingly no closer to resolution, a computer scientist and a visual artist, both currently living in Charlotte, are working on a project that explores this charged issue with quiet intensity.

Interactive Surveillance, an interactive digital art installation developed by Celine Latulipe and Annabel Manning, puts the viewer-participant in a unique, uneasy position—conducting surveillance of immigrants as they make the night crossing from Mexico into the United States.

Interactive Surveillance combines Manning’s digital paintings and symTone, Latulipe’s photo-editing software, to create an installation that allows the participant to investigate a moving desertscape projected on a wall or screen. Using two wireless gyroscopic mice, one in each hand, the participant activates surveillance lenses that look like searchlights or targets, revealing shadowy figures.

“It’s not didactic,” says Manning. “It’s a way of prompting people to reflect on a situation. A lot of people think these folks are just drug runners, but they are unknowable and we’ve kind of made them unknowable. They become powerless once they cross. They’re invisible, immigrant shadows.”

Until just a few weeks ago, Interactive Surveillance required the presence of Latulipe and/or Manning to explain it and guide participants through the experience. In this format, it has been presented at the Digital Live Art Conference Liverpool, the Computer-Human Interaction Conference 2010 Media Showcase in Atlanta, and in demonstrations and lectures at the Light Factory, McColl Center for Visual Art, University of North Carolina at Charlotte, and Queens University.

Interactive Surveillance starts with stills from video surveillance footage Manning finds on the Internet. She will alter an image using a variety of techniques, often drawing on it with traditional mediums like inks, then scanning it and loading it back into the computer, where she manipulates it in Photoshop or draws on it using a Wacom tablet. She uses software that allows her to pan and zoom across the images, as well as alter the transparency and contrasts. “Each way of working causes you to have a different relationship with
the image. It's a continuous process.”

“A lot of the images are infrared, so you can see very few physical features,” she says. Since this work is about the loss of identity that accompanies a border crossing, the ghostly infrared images are chillingly appropriate.

Latulipe developed symTone, her photo-editing software, as a more intuitive alternative to Photoshop. “I like to think of the technologies that I develop as being novice-friendly. It’s not like learning Photoshop. symTone has five commands or functions. It takes ten minutes to learn the basics and a day or two to feel like you really know the program.”

symTone enabled Manning to create expressive slideshows. Prior to that, she used programs such as iMovie and its Ken Burns feature, but was limited in what she could do with it. But with symTone, she can take one of her images and, in a few minutes, create a small movie.

“The manipulation techniques that I have for photo editing allow you to explore lots of possibilities without a lot of ‘go and select this thing, go and select that,’” says Latulipe. “With this software, there isn’t a lot of tedium. Annabel found the process more immediate.”

At first, Manning created slideshows of her images with the pan-and-zoom effect. But what really got her attention was symTone’s circular lens tool. Designed for comparing the details in the original and modified images, Manning saw in it a totally different set of possibilities. “It was a very functional tool initially, but I saw it as an artistic tool. That was the beginning of a dialogue, where Celine really wanted to explore how I could use these tools artistically.”

“She really wanted to create videos where, as the camera panned and zoomed, the tones would get darker and lighter,” says Latulipe. “And I said, ‘Oh, okay, give me a little while.’ And I went away and coded for a month. The result is something that allows you to get very evocative, emotional variations.”

Manning realized that she wanted people to see her work in this more fluid, changing state, and participate in its creation, as opposed to having people simply look at a static finished product. And they both realized that they had the potential to simulate the process of putting people under surveillance and make all of us complicit in the process. To the uninitiated coding may sound boring, but says Latulipe, “No one’s ever coded this before. Nobody’s ever done this. I’m the first one, so it’s an adventure.

Latulipe and Manning are now moving into another phase of the project, in which participants use the mice to simultaneously adjust different layers in an image, making figures disappear and reappear. They are also introducing sound elements, which become louder and softer in coordination with the disappearing figures. This is accomplished by using software Latulipe has written in the Processing language, an important open-source programming tool.

Latulipe never expressly intended to work at the intersection of creativity and technology. In high school, she took drama and art classes, but dropped her creative endeavors when she headed off to college.
"When I started doing computing, I was mostly interested in the idea of haptic feedback, devices that would physically push back at you, to make the experience more realistic. But I started playing with the idea of having two mice. Then I realized that there was this whole niche of research—two hands working together symmetrically—that was unexplored. The more I worked on this idea of having two mice, of having two cursors on the screen, the more my work became about expressive interaction techniques."

While working on her PhD at the University of Waterloo, she tested the tools she was developing on both artists and non-artists. Although she had the strong sense that her work could help non-artists unlock their creativity, it slowly dawned on her that what she was doing involved people who were already committed to creative work.

From 1986-96, Manning did AIDS research at NYU Medical Center, interviewing potentially HIV infected patients. In conjunction with that work, she wanted to build multimedia educational kiosks. She entered a multimedia certificate program at NYU “full of business people who were all trying to make graphs, while I was making figures.” Unfortunately, there wasn't enough money to build the kiosks, she says, “But the experience got my senses going.” After that, Manning went to Massachusetts College of Art, which she paid for by working as an assistant in the video department. “I always dabbled in it but never committed to it, so when I began working with Celine, it was great, because then I didn't have to figure out everything myself. The imagery was always more important to me, so I had to find someone who could so some of the technology. Most of the technology. All of the technology.”

Latulipe came to Charlotte in 2006, when she accepted an assistant professorship in the Software and Information Systems Department in the University of North Carolina at Charlotte's College of Computing and Informatics. Manning arrived here in 2005. Since then, in addition to her studio practice, she has been in residence and taught at the McColl Center for Visual Art and done significant work bringing Charlotte's Latino artists into the mainstream of the local art community.

The two clicked when Latulipe was developing a collaborative drawing program and Manning was one of four artists testing it. “I would give them mice and they would draw a picture on a canvas that was projected on a wall,” says Latulipe. "The end product wasn't very interesting. But what struck me and the other people in the room was that this technique was really performative. So while it initially felt like a failure, it in fact opened a new door.”
Interactive Surveillance Art Installation from Celine Latulipe on Vimeo.

So what’s next for Interactive Surveillance? “I’m thinking the imagery can also be generated from the experience—that I could make stills based on people interacting with the mice and the projections,” says Manning. “And Celine and I are creating a web version, so that people can actually interact with these images from their own computers, using two mice.”

In addition to these long-established goals, they have been dealing with a more immediate challenge. Interactive Surveillance was accepted into the “Borders” show at Root Division, an exhibition space in San Francisco, so Latulipe and Manning spent part of the summer in the frenzied process of converting it from a demo into a self-standing installation—something that can remain in an art gallery for a month or more and be used by gallery visitors without someone standing there and guiding them through the process. This has presented artistic, technical, and logistical challenges, including rewriting code to accommodate trackballs instead of expensive gyroscopic mice, securing a Mac that could remain at the gallery, and myriad other concerns large and small.

“The problems we’re working out now are very exciting,” says Manning. “We can’t always be there and it can’t always be for one night. This is the beginning of it taking on a life of its own.”

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