DIFFERENT FACES OF SELF-SURVEILLANCE AND DATA COLLECTING

An explorative and analytical dialogue between my work, and the "Dear Data" project by Giorgia Lupi and Stefanie Posavec.

We live in a society, where data collection and surveillance have become part of our everyday lives. Our identity is documented and interpreted through varying lenses of data, that can be of many faces and uses. Considering the type of the data, they can be used for protection, for ads generating and targeting, profiling or assisting us to explore our own data and use them for our benefit. My project uses self-surveillance and data-collection as a tool to explore the role of identity in contemporary, surveillance society, drawing on the hidden processes of surveillance happening quietly in the background. I am exploring print and publication as a tool to give tangibility to the data and engage the viewer to create suggestive experiences. The position I have as a designer in my project is somehow both interconnected, but also opposed and challenged by the "Dear Data" project by Giorgia Lupi and Stefanie Posavec, setting the stage for a critical exploration of data's power in constructing and narrating the 'self.' My writing explores the main tension points and similarities between both works and opens up questions that can help my work in further development.

DATA AS A TOOL TO (RE)SHAPE, (RE)INTERPRET AND (RE)BUILD…

"Dear Data" is an art project by Giorgia Lupi and Stefanie Posavec, that focuses on data collecting and analogue data visualisations to showcase personal daily life through hand-drawn illustrated visualisations on postcards. For one year, the artists exchanged weekly postcards across the Atlantic, each card showing specific personal aspects like their emotions, activities, or social interactions. The project highlights the beauty of data, in everyday life, emphasising that behind every data point is a deeply personal, human narrative. Their approach contrasts with my exploration of surveillance and data's overwhelming and almost pervasive nature. While 'Dear Data' embraces data as a tool of personal storytelling and connection, my work delves into the ways data shape and in a sense "Re/de-humanise" (quoting marks as the work "re/de-humanise" sounds a little bit too strong). What is meant by that, is that data have the power to deconstruct, and re-explain identities in numbers through monitored actions (Quantified Self, Deborah Lupton), creating parallel identities within the contemporary world. However, despite their differences, both projects acknowledge the narrative power inherent in data.

This tension between data as a humanising versus an identity (re)shaping tool is noticeable when contrasting the style and visual representation of both projects. 'Dear Data' creates a friendly, conversational tone through postcards, offering warmth and personal touch, celebrating the individuality often lost in digital translation and the beauty that can be hidden in data and data visualisations. In my, also physical, printed work, I aim to prompt a discussion too, between the work and the audience, offering a space for self-interpretation. However, using my tools and medium, I am exploring how the collected data are shaping, and categorising our identity and the secondary/shadow selves, almost re-identifying our identities. Even though my project has been focusing on uncomfortable topics around surveillance and surveillance society, the aim of my work is to be more neutral, to create discussion and open suggestive interpretation.

These diverging approaches underscore the projects' varying visualisation techniques and structures. 'Dear Data' unfolds episodically, each week offering a new bit of the artists' lives, inviting the audience into their personal space with every postcard. My project, alternatively, doesn't follow this episodic structure, presenting a cumulative, almost oppressive load of information to reflect the constant nature of data collection. The project invites interaction through its hybrid format of a poster and a booklet. The act of unfolding to see the 'bigger picture' on the poster, of transitioning between the booklet and poster, engages viewers physically, making them active participants in decoding the narrative.

Understanding who has control is key when looking at these projects. 'Dear Data' shows a situation where people themselves tell their own stories through data they choose to share. On the other hand, my project points out how, in society, our stories are often written by others we don't see, think about or pay too much attention to, such as data being collected by third parties. This difference in who's in charge of our stories shapes how these projects talk about being watched in private versus in public. While 'Dear Data' keeps watching between two friends and is based on choice and trust, my project shows how this watching happens on a bigger scale within society, making us think about the line between our physical self and the self that can be described by the collected data.

MOVING FURTHER IN MY WORK

Even though these projects have their differences, they share one important thing: they both remind us that there are real people behind the data. Both 'Dear Data' and my project don't see data as just random information without any connection to humans. They show that behind all this data are real people, each with their own life stories, worries, and wishes. This helps people think more deeply about how personal data affects us in our everyday lives.

Exploring "Dear Data" in connection to my work, the challenges it gives me, and the intersection our works share, makes me ask important questions. How could I create deeper storytelling in my work in a way Deborah Lupton and Stephanie Posavec did? What stories remain untold in the shadows of the data I collected and used in my project? How could I use and deepen the social aspect of exploring and exchanging data, to create more suggestive work? How to create a deeper connection between my work and the data? Could incorporating a hand-drawn, personal element in representing collected data from surveillance evoke a stronger emotional connection, acknowledging one's unique identity and human qualities in an era overwhelmed by massive amounts of data? Finally, is there any other way to approach the type of data I am collecting, to make the work more accessible and timeless at the same time, while still exploring the role of identity in contemporary, surveillance society? Moving further with my research and my work, these questions will help me to (re)direct my approach and interest.

REFERENCES:
Posavec, S., & Lupi, G. (2016). Dear Data (Art project). Retrieved from https://www.dear-data.com/
Lupton, D. (2016). The Quantified Self. Polity Press: Cambridge.