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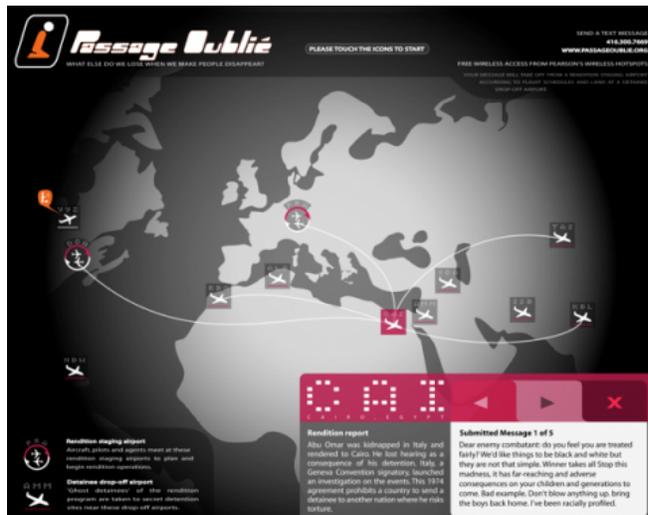


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Passage Oublié

Maroussia Lévesque and Jason Lewis
Trespassing | Transgression



Most of the time, I feel like an impostor. I am always sneaking in places where I don't belong. My work is about finding cracks—interstices—windows of opportunities to convey subversive material. This is a very precarious position, for I am always vulnerable to legitimating the system, all the while thinking I am subverting it.



Passage Oublié makes use of one such interstice: the opportunity to display an art piece at Pearson airport to 6 million passengers for a duration of 11 months. Being granted access to post-security areas was an important aspect of the piece. Negotiating entrance to restricted zones allowed a form of sanctioned trespassing. I will say more later on this process.

Context

First, a word about the project. The challenge we undertook at Obx Labs was to create a fun, visually appealing installation to engage passengers at Pearson airport about the illegal detention and transport of suspect terrorists. **Passage Oublié** is an interactive touchscreen where one can leave comments on a map featuring documented rendition flight paths. Extraordinary rendition is an American initiative to transport presumed terrorists to secret detention sites where they are interrogated outside any legal or formal framework. This global mistreatment network takes people off the radar, off the record, off the map. While we know about Guantanamo Bay, more secretive detention sites are scattered throughout the world, taking advantage of increasing mobility to constantly relocate their operations. Secret detention sites, known as « black sites » also differ from Guantanamo in that detention is outsourced to local authorities. Local control over the prisoners is only nominal, allowing the United States to drive the process and obfuscate any responsibility for the alleged mistreatment taking place in these facilities. We can hope that President Obama will issue clear orders to halt this practice as he did for Guantanamo Bay. But when the project was conceived in 2006–7, there was absolutely no political will to deviate from the post-9/11 ticking bomb rhetoric justifying such departures from basic human rights guarantees.

It is important to clarify that while Pearson airport, the site of our installation, was not specifically involved in the illegal transport of terror suspects, a shocking number of civilian airports worldwide were. Rendition operation camouflage their activities in civilian air traffic using jets leased from fictitious companies. We've detailed the dynamics of extraordinary renditions here: <http://wi.hexagram.ca>

Interactivity

Passage Oublié is an interactive touchscreen where users annotate a map featuring the flight paths and civilian airports involved in extraordinary rendition. The display automatically cycles between 15 documented flight paths. Instead of using lines to show the flight paths, we use messages sent by the public and animate these entries along the flight paths.

In order to contribute to the project, the public could send a text message to a Toronto cell phone number, or via a web form on passageoublie.net. We invited contributions to focus on such questions as: Are rendition flights an acceptable means of dealing with the threat of terrorism? Does the end justify mistreatment when it comes to the 'war on terror'? Are the liberal democracies involved in this activity compromising the constitutionally protected principle that one is innocent until proven guilty?

We solicited and received contributions locally at Pearson airport and downtown Toronto, and from web users worldwide.



Another way of engaging with the project consists of using the touchscreen. This simple interaction allows passengers on the go to browse other's contributions and to trigger informative pop-ups. Upon being touched, each airport icon will display content about how this specific location is involved. Touching all icons rapidly will cause the whole network to be visible for a few moments. The visualization, like our ephemeral knowledge of shifting black site locations, vanishes rapidly.



Unseen political trespasser in neutral space

Passage Oublié negotiates between formalist new media art and political demands. If one is to look at the piece quickly, it may just be mistaken as eye candy. Akin to rendition flights camouflaging themselves in the civilian air transportation network, this political piece camouflages itself as a seemingly innocuous slick art piece. Despite a growing number of politically engaged new media art pieces, the mainstream association of new technologies with the benign celebration of consumerism, or with their direct lineage from the military complex persists. This worked to our advantage, since it attracted people who would otherwise be put off by a more overt form of political action, such as protest and petitions. Passage Oublié is an undercover political agent trespassing in the seemingly neutral airport space.

Neutral or invisibly charged space?

Airports self-define as politically-neutral spaces, yet the process of custom clearance consists of increasingly invasive security measures. We allow ever larger trespasses on our physical integrity and dignity, as anyone who has been patted down will agree. Airports also invoke the rhetoric of emergency measures curtailing individual rights: a trespass on constitutionally entrenched rights against discrimination, and on the presumption of innocence so dear to Western juridical systems. These trespasses are political in that they shift power from the private sphere to the benefit of the administrative-utilitarian machinery. As the theater of these trespasses, the airport is a politically charged space.





Another reason airports are not politically neutral is their instrumental role in the secret detention program. Some of the rendition flights transporting secret prisoners to and from black sites used civilian airports. Interestingly enough, the trespassing here is reversed: powerful authorities seek to bury their affairs in the unsuspecting flow of commercial airlines.

Review mirror: whose successful infiltration?

I cannot say for sure whether Passage Oublié was successful at politicizing this airport more than this airport was at sanitizing Passage Oublié. To put it grossly, the dilemma is whether the piece increased the visual value and marketability of the airport space as a clean, iMac-like advertisement, or if it is best described as a successful "power grab". An economic frame of reference may not be all that ill-fitting; on the balance of effects, did Passage Oublié legitimate the airport more than it subverted it? Maybe the very presence of the project is a notable gain. Maybe the ensuing opportunity to speak about rendition flights to diverse audiences and to publish in various journals, such as No More Potlucks, should be considered. Possibly the public forum we created was a step, albeit infinitesimal, towards generating public dialogue on the implications of the post-9/11 denial of basic rights to presumed terrorists made in our name. Download the list messages http://passageoublié.org/downloads/passage_oublié_messages.pdf

It is not for me to make the final assessment on this question, but my practice has been deeply concerned with walking this fine line between pursuing an activist agenda in somewhat inhospitable territory and letting that realm recuperate my work for its own purposes.

This type of negotiation was particularly salient in Passage Oublié. Many people, beginning with our team, wondered why the airport authority did not veto the curator's selection of our uncompromisingly controversial proposal in the first place. What followed was a total collaboration on their part. The only condition was the exclusion of violent words, such as "bomb", and the supervision of a security guard while doing interviews in post-checkpoint areas in the airport. Perhaps Foucault would say that small resistance gestures are inevitably recuperated by dominant forces: these are "the infinitesimal mechanisms... and then see how these mechanisms of power have been – and continue to be – invested, colonized, utilized, involuted, transformed, displaced, extended, etc., by more general mechanisms and by forms of global domination." This logic denies any agency to micro, or capillary movements. Is it possible to have a win-win situation, where Obx Labs gained access to a wide audience and the airport got a solid art project? Perhaps there is a tragic tendency to see power dynamics as a zero-sum game.

For a core – periphery conception of power

The airport authorities granted us access to boarding areas beyond the security and custom checkpoints in order to do field research during the prototyping phase of the project. We accessed this area via a hidden door followed by a maze of corridors. An interesting allegory lies here: art provides a unique avenue to the core of power, via a hidden door followed by a winding road.

I'd like to take this opportunity to open up a wider conception of how art relates to power. I use the words core and periphery not in their context of the dependency theory – although an intuitive parallel may develop as you read these lines – but to denote a core of official power and a periphery of lower intensity, less recognized forms of agency. To put it bluntly, liberal professionals, entrepreneurs and politicians are at the core of decision-making. They hold the enabling degrees, access to the public purse and to private financing. From a realist perspective – now I borrow this concept from political science – actors at the core have the hard power to influence

the world. Artists, among others, are agents at the periphery of the power distribution. While they seldom have a strong bargaining chip to affect the world, their lack of allegiance to an electorate, shareholder board or professional society enables a wider scope of freedom. Agents at the core have the power to make and implement changes, but their hands are tied. Artists at the periphery have considerable latitude, but little agency to frontally alter things. There is an inverse proportionality between the power to make change and the freedom to make change. While curators, grant requirements and the art market do play a role in shaping art, the intensity of these restrictions are in no way comparable to that of public or private accountability for agents within the core of power. One way that artists have increased their power of actual change without compromising on their inherent autonomy is by being impostors in the core. This soft power mechanism has taken a variety of forms, from the ephemeral graffiti of the GRL http://graffitiresearchlab.com/?page_id=95#video, to the performances of the Yes Men <http://theyesmen.org>, and the subtle Notepad <http://www.swamp.nu/projects/notepad.html> intervention of Swamp <http://www.swamp.nu>, infiltrating Congress with the names of Iraqi civilian casualties. These projects, and perhaps Passage Oublié, are promising instantiations of trespassing as a mode of political intervention.

Maroussia Lévesque holds a BA in Computation arts from Concordia University, Montreal, Canada, where she was the conceptual lead at Obx Laboratory for Experimental Media, Hexagram. She is more interested in politics than computers, and tries to reconcile both through her studies in law and new media. Her experience in hip hop and community work (both in Brazil and Canada) is motivated by the potential of subcultures as social emancipators as well as a potentially revolutionary stance against the current order. In her free time, Maroussia enjoys blinking the lights of large buildings <http://blink.digital-spa.com> and make relaxing computer yoga <http://yoga.digital-spa.com/> programs with her partner. She is also learning a fifth language (Arabic), to establish an ssh tunnel between the cultures flowing in her blood. Maroussia is currently learning and unlearning legal constructs at McGill Law school.

Jason Lewis is a poet, digital media artist and software designer. His research/creation practice revolves around experiments in visual language, text and typography, with a core interest in how the deep structure of digital media can be used to create innovative forms of expression. His creative work has been featured at the Ars Electronica Center, Elektra Festival, ISEA, SIGGRAPH, Urban Screens and Mobilefest, among other venues, and his writing about new media has been presented at conferences, festivals and gallery exhibitions internationally. He founded Obx Laboratory for Experimental Media, where he directs research/creation projects in digital texts, systems for creative use of mobile technology, alternative interfaces for live performance and the use of desktop virtual reality to assist Aboriginal communities in preserving, interpreting and communicating cultural histories. Obx Labs is deeply committed to developing innovative forms of expression by working on conceptual, creative and technical levels simultaneously. He is currently an Associate Professor of Computation Arts at Concordia University in Montreal, Quebec. www.obxlabs.net.

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