Automatized Images, and ‘Eye’-dentities along Nicosia’s Green Line Border

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The 'operating table' is a design installation that is currently being developing to explore the spatiality of Nicosia's border.[1] Responding to the border division in Cyprus, the 'operating table' uses a photographic apparatus to re-construct the imagery along Nicosia's Green Line.

The apparatus, by automatically capturing and re-producing imagery of participants, creates hybrid combinations between human and nonhuman agents. As such the postcolonial dominant identities of Greek-Cypriots and Turkish-Cypriots that are predominant today are questioned, what are produced instead are hybrids. The photographic apparatus of the *operating table*, and its automation responds to the border surveillance condition, therefore its "process remains concealed: black box"[2] as it needs to be camouflaged from the surveillance apparatus. Following Vilem Flusser, the "criticism of technical images" developed in this article "must be aimed at an elucidation of its inner workings."[3]

This article will start by explaining how the *operating table*, a custom-made installation, operates along Nicosia's Green Line border. In the section 'The *Operating Table*—Mirroring Surveillance', the surveillance apparatus will be referred to by looking at Foucault's Panopticon and defensive architecture more broadly. The question of identity within this contested territory is outlined from the start. The *operating table* camouflages and mirrors the surveillance apparatus. The second section 'Nonhuman Visualities' articulates the theoretical approach towards the *operating table*. By superimposing the hybridisation of nonhuman and human actants from Bruno Latour with criticism of photographic automation in the work of Vilem Flusser, the *operating table* tries to impose a new way to think of visuality. Hence, the technical operations will be observed in more detail. The third section 'Visual Mediations' focuses on the visuality of the stereoscope that is part of the *operating table* and aims to further explore the

1 The installation can be defined as a 'critical spatial practice'. See: Rendell, *Art and Architecture: A Place Between*, 6.

2 Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, 60.

3 Ibid.

hybridisation of human vision and its relation to the nonhuman technical apparatus. Focusing on the interconnectedness of human and nonhumans the final section aims to unravel how the technical hybrid assemblage questions the very identity that is assumed in the context of the border. The conclusion aims to re-pose the question of identity in Cyprus, and how notions of pre-defined identities are problematized by the *operating table*.

THE OPERATING TABLE — MIRRORING SURVEILLANCE

The *operating table* is a device/installation that takes the form of a transportable and assembled table that attaches onto Nicosia's buffer zone barrels (Figure. 1). At first sight the *operating table* is perceived as a series of curious objects. The table is divided into four parts with each part containing a quarter of an inverse mould of a head. Once the four pieces are assembled, the cavity of a human head enables visitors to place their head inside this receptacle. There are two peepholes in the position of the eyes, that emit light once the parts are lined up. What one sees when they position their head inside this cavity, are stereoscopic projections of themselves, and others, that were captured whilst they were trying to align the parts. One unexpectedly sees oneself seeing oneself in three-dimensional depth, where the background and foreground are strangely composited. Figure and the contextual background produce new unexpected relations with the immediate context. Something that is located inside the physically inaccessible Green Line is brought to the foreground through the camera lens. Manipulated through the software composition, objects change scale, and proximity, informing indeterminate relations between background and foreground. The visitor's body becomes an object in a shifting field of vegetations, dilapidated buildings, cats, clouds and so on. For a few seconds, one loses their orientation, as the image uproots oneself from their surroundings, and from any prescribed identities. By producing an 'out of body' experience, one's identity is, at least momentarily, contested. Through this device one's identity is no longer clearly subjectified within a regime of power. Before expanding on this operation and how it entangles human and nonhuman agents, it is important to consider the border surveillance apparatus.

Various signs remind us that the Green Line border is a site where photographs are mostly prohibited. Along Nicosia's Green Line on the south side, one will observe various observation watchtowers. The same occurs on the north side, whereas the Green Line is patrolled by the UN nations. The space of the border in this case acts as a Panopticon. Michel Foucault's paper entitled 'Panopticism' (1974) examines Bentham's prison model. The panopticon, a centrally planned prison with an inspection tower in the centre and prison cells arranged along the circumference of the circular plan, produced a very simple and effective means of spatially controlling the prisoners. The radial prison cell arrangement was visually accessible from the watchtower.[4] From the central point the guard was able to view any of the prison cells. The prisoner, aware that they might be seen at any time without ever knowing when, could never see the inspecting guard (due to the blind arrangement). The one-way viewing system makes it possible for the guard to observe any prisoner at any time, whilst prisoners are aware that they are objects of a systematic gaze. The prisoner is psychologically made to internalize the gaze of the singular surveillance guard, introjecting the all-seeing Eye. The prisoner is constantly being watched without knowing when by the guard that remains invisible in the one-way viewing mechanism. The spatial mechanism therefore assumes that the prisoner "is seen, but he does not see; he is the object of information never a subject in communication."[5] The power of the disciplinary body as a *pan-optic* [all seeing] eye subverts the subject 'in communication' into a disciplined object of observation. As Giorgio Agamben reveals subjectification in Foucault's disciplinary society proceeds through 'the process' of desubjectification. He writes, "Foucault has demonstrated how, in a disciplinary society, apparatuses aim to create—through a series of practices, discourses, and bodies of knowledge—docile, yet free, bodies that assume their identity and their 'freedom' as subjects in the very process of their desubjectification."[6]

Subjectification in the space of the city happens through the control of physical control of territory. The defensive architecture[7] of Nicosia, is comprised of not only watchtowers, it also includes walls, barricades, cameras, as well as various national symbols such as flags and slogans. Hence regimes of power deploy a defensive architecture that "seeks to discipline 'undesirables' by designing against alternative uses of the city with the explicit purpose of excluding from public space those who engage in unsanctioned or undesired behaviours."[8] From the point of view of the State, one must abide to the territorial rules of the Green Line border.

The *operating table* travels, and attaches onto Nicosia's barrels along the Green Line. Its form appears unsuspectingly alien to the guards. The concealed photographic camera apparatuses are positioned inside the *operating table*. The urban surveillance space that monitors and maintains the behaviour of subjects is, in this case, infiltrated by this device. The

4 For the full description of the Panopticon layout including the relationship of each cell to the inspector's house through particular screens (blinds) and lighting conditions see: Bentham, "Panopticon; or, The Inspection House", in *The Works of Jeremy Bentham*, 39-66.

5 Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, 200.

6 Agamben, "What Is an Apparatus?" in *What Is an Apparatus? and Other Essays*, 19-20.

7 The term defensive architecture is explained by Smith and Walters. See: Smith and Walters. "Desire Lines and defensive architecture in modern urban environments", 3.

8 Ibid.

operating table thus mirrors the visuality of the border, and by doing so mirrors the surveillance gaze itself. It literally records what it sees and this includes watchtowers, guards, signage, and any defensive architecture that is in its way. It doesn't acknowledge what is prohibited.

THE OPERATING TABLE — NONHUMAN VISUALITIES

The table as surface "where texts had been written by men or inspired by God—never inspired or written by nonhumans"[9] is here subverted. Nonhuman agents undercut the traditional role of the table. The *operating table* includes an assemblage of hardware, software and assembled components. How does it work from the technical point of view? An ultrasonic sensor triggered by a moving body (car, cat, human, etc.) is attached to an Arduino microcontroller. This sends a signal to the DSLR camera, through the Raspberry PI microcomputer, the shutter release captures a doubled image, of a stereoscopic pair. The pair is made possible because of a mounted customized mirror device that is attached to the front of the camera lens. Within seconds, the doubled image is split into two parts and sent to two LCD screens, via a router connection. Each screen has a mounted raspberry PI and projects one of the two stereoscopic images onto a mirrored surface. The mirrored surfaces slanted 45 degrees from each eye, projects each of the two images from the stereoscopic pair. When one positions their head inside the head mold, made out of clear resin, their eyes are framed by mild steel sheets that block any peripheral vision. What one sees are the stereoscopic projection of themselves, and the immediate environment.

The views captured by the device are composited views, where background and foreground are swapped through the software. In other words, images of backgrounds of the site are stitched together with the figure outline in the foreground. This produces unpredictable relations in the image, but also highlights details and elements that are captured by the sensing recording of the images. For example, one will observe everyday activities by migrant workers who live in flats opposite one part of the site juxtaposed with the space that has been frozen in time since 1974. The stereoscopic view brings into the fore unexpected relations that are heightened by the illusory cardboard like depth of the mirrored images. Vegetations, barbed wire, and clouds are thus strangely perceived in-depth. One's perception of these images is further perplexed as they are produced and projected in the same space.

Flusser states that the "lack of criticism of technical images is potentially dangerous at a time when technical images are in the process of displacing texts—dangerous for the reason that the 'objectivity' of technical images is

9 Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, 23.

an illusion."[10] Flusser is warning against the algorithmic abstract signification of symbols, through technical images. And this is why he claims that "as artists, architects place themselves between the images and their significance."[11] The *operating table* problematizes the automated technologies of technical images. Flusser explains how electronic images become "simpler by means of more and more perfect automation, eternal recurrence of the same. They form a camera memory, a databank of automatic functions."[12] For Flusser this gives rise to the domination of images, to a programming of society by computation. Bernard Stiegler mentions in *Technics and Time 1*, how through the act of automation certain possibilities are actualized within a variable system, therefore automation is made possible by eliminating many other possibilities. A better understanding of the technical object for Stiegler provides a grasp of the indeterminate virtual possibilities that the technical object could offer. According to Bernard Stiegler "the technical object is no longer merely inert, but neither is it living matter … [it] transforms itself in time as living matter transforms itself in its interaction with the milieu."[13] Stiegler's non-anthropocentric position stresses that the technical object increasingly evolves in and of itself, i.e. beyond human intentionality or mastery. Yet, as Stiegler suggests, the human while no longer being the "intentional actor" is now the "*operator*" of the technical object, and of the broader technical system.[14] Stiegler reveals the misunderstanding of the technical object and the "possible alienation of humanity (or of culture) by technics."[15] He observes that "[t]o know the essence of the machine, and thereby understanding the sense of technics in general, is also to know the place of the *human* in technical ensembles."[16]

Blaise Agüera y Arcas, the leader of Google's Seattle AI group[17], and founder of the Artists and Machine Intelligence program (AMI)[18], attempts "to rethink art as something generated by (and consumed by) hybrid beings."[19] Agüera y Arcas refers to Flusser's description of the camera as having both

10 Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, 15.

11 Ibid.

12 Ibid, 58.

13 Stiegler, *Technics and Time, 1: The Fault of Epimetheus*, 49.

14 Ibid, 66.

15 Ibid.

16 Ibid.

17 The official website of Google AI states: 'At Google AI, we're conducting research that advances the state-of-the-art in the field, applying AI to products and to new domains, and developing tools to ensure that everyone can access AI'. See: https://ai.google/about/. Accessed 31 March 2019. No longer available.

18 AMI is "a program at Google that brings artists and engineers together to realize projects using Machine Intelligence". See: https://ami.withgoogle.com. Accessed 31 March 2019.

19 Aguera y Arcas, "Art in the Age of Machine Intelligence", Medium, 23 February 2016. https://medium.com/artists-and-machine-intelligence. Accessed 25 March 2019.

'software' and 'program'.[20] Flusser anticipated the cultural impact that the photographic 'technical' image will have on media. By doing so he traced the possibilities of the photographic image well before the first digital camera was made (1988). Agüera y Arcas writes on Flusser:

> maybe it took a philosopher's squint to note the "programming" inherent in the grinding and configuration of lenses, the creation of a frame and field of view, the timing of the shutters, the details of chemical emulsions and film processing.[21]

Agüera y Arcas then goes on to parallel the operation of the analog camera not only to digital operations but also to the filtering operation of the eye:

> ... code does things like removing noise in near constant areas, sharpening edges, and filling in for defective pixels with plausible surrounding color not unlike the way our retina hallucinate away the blood vessels at the back of the eye that would otherwise mar our visual field.[22]

The notion of the hybrid can thus be used here to understand the relations between human and nonhuman. It is important to analyze these in order to construct an understanding of the *operating table*.

HYBRIDISATION

The hybrid in Latour's work assumes that it is not differentiated into the natural and social, as happens with 'modern' societies. Latour shows how 'premoderns' do not make this dual distinction. As Latour writes:

> As soon as we direct our attention simultaneously to the work of purification and the work of hybridisation, we immediately stop being wholly modern, and our future begins to change. At the same time we stop having been modern, because we become retrospectively aware that the two sets of practices have always already been at work in the historical period that is ending. Our past begins to change.[23]

20 On the 'program' of the photograph Flusser observes that: "[t]here are therefore two interweaving programs in the camera. One of them motivates the camera into taking pictures; the other one permits the photographer to play. Beyond these are further programs—that of the photographic industry that programmed the camera; that of the industrial complex that programmed the photographic industry; that of the socio-economic system that programmed the industrial complex; and so on. Of course, there can be no "final" program of a "final" apparatus since every program requires a metaprogram by which it is programmed. The hierarchy of programs is open at the top". See: Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, 29.

21 Aguera y Arcas, "Art in the Age of Machine Intelligence".

22 Ibid.

23 Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, 11.

Albena Yaneva writes: this notion of hybridization "implies taking a position in the middle of events from where one can pay attention to both humans and nonhumans simultaneously, allowing for the proliferation of hybrids."[24] And so, it is from this lens, that the *operating table* is approached. The Latourian hybridization assumes the constant formation of expanding networks. The operating table thus aims to galvanize the assemblage of relations and to problematize how identities are constructed by regimes of power. To emphasize this point I will now return to the political implications of the photograph on the site.

Photographing in certain parts of the Green Line is prohibited. Whilst photographing and documenting a specific area, I was stopped by a soldier that was patrolling. The soldier told me that I was not allowed to take photographs and so I received a warning. Upon returning to the site with the device no suspicion was raised because the device itself doesn't appear to transgress the prohibition of the camera. This is because does not suspect that there is a camera inside the device, and that it is remotely capturing images along this territory. By parasiting a space that is inhospitable for photographic apparatuses it forms new modes of hybridization.

As Latour claims in his lecture 'A Cautious Prometheus: A Few Steps Towards a Philosophy of Design', "[w]hat I am pressing for is a means for drawing *things* together—gods, non humans and mortals included."[25] And in the case of the *operating table*, we assume that the nonhumans and humans assume relations that challenge the very imposition of ethno-nationalist identities along the border, a matter of concern for Cypriot identities. Let us re-trace the impact of the *operating table.* Latour poses a question which is applicable to this particular case. He asks, "where are the visualization tools that allow the contradictory and controversial nature of matters of concern to be represented?"[26] The device makes hybrids visible. Firstly, it produces an image of oneself that is impossible without technical mediation. One can never see oneself, i.e. one's face in depth, without such a technical mediation. This produces an out of body experience, a shock. Following this image, one is further unsettled, as their 'selves' are dis-placed. They are represented in familiar views but ones where the background would have been impossible without image compositing. The views are interspersed with a digitized self-image and anything else that comes into the background. The odd juxtaposition with animals, buildings, vegetation and objects produces an image that is incompossible in terms of identification. Hence identity is unsettled.

24 Yaneva, *Latour for Architects*, 11.

25 Latour, "A Cautious Prometheus? A Few Steps Toward a Philosophy of Design (with Special Attention to Peter Sloterdijk)," *Networks of Design* keynote lecture, Design History Society Falmouth, 03 Sep, 2008.

26 Ibid.

VISUAL MEDIATION

We have explained how the visual apparatus works, without getting in too much technical detail, and without every possibly giving a full view of the nonhuman parts that interact within the system. What about the extension of the technical apparatus in the operation of the human eyes? In this case Henri Bergson's writing on the eyes in *Creative Evolution* is useful.

Bergson's reference "to the eye calls attention to the complexity of the organ, which is usually overlooked in relation to the unity of its function (the act of seeing)."[27] According to Bergson:

the mechanism [machine] of the eye is, in short, composed of an infinity of mechanisms, all of extreme complexity. Yet vision is one simple fact. As soon as the eye opens, the visual act is effected. Just because the act is simple, the slightest negligence on the part of nature in the building of the infinitely complex machine would have made vision impossible.[28]

The complex machinic operation of vision is evident in the stereoscope as it "transitions from monocular receptions to their binocular fusion that occurs in the mind."[29] The stereoscope itself and its relation to vision made possible this type of visuality. The technical mediation of the image in the *operating table* is thus reliant on certain technologies and the ensuing visualities that they reproduce. In the early nineteenth century the stereoscopic experiments of Sir Charles Wheatstone offer an example of hybridisation between humans and nonhumans.

The scientific discoveries in optics of the early nineteenth century, which then led to discoveries of the binocular physiology of the eyes, were distinct from the medium of photography. Jonathan Crary observes that discoveries that enabled precise measurements of optical axes, produced new knowledge of the body and made it a contested area of both control and experimentation.[30] The stereoscope was an outcome of these optical experiments. The photograph contributed to the developments of the stereoscope and had a crucial role within its setup. The initial stereograms used by Wheatstone in his stereoscope were drawings.[31] Photographic pairs taken by Antoine Claude (1951-52) of Wheatstone and his family[32] were taken after the invention of the stereoscope. The first photographic stereoscope image to have been produced was at the request of Wheatstone himself, who would then also be stereoscopically photographed.[33] In the early trials, and because it was "difficult at the time to find two cameras that were optically equivalent", the photographic camera had to be moved to mimic the eyes' binocular angles. The photographic pair would then be reproduced within Wheatstone's stereoscopic framework.

The entanglements between human bodies and nonhuman technologies in the production of the analogue stereoscope cannot be understated. One can infer that the very distinction between one and the other is unproductive. In the process of the experimentation of the stereoscope, devices had to measure the optical axes, and the photographic camera had to mimic the eyes' binocularity. What ensued from such hybrids was a new visuality.

Similarly, today, we need to seek productive hybrids within contemporary visual networks. According to Flusser, the photographic universe "programs the observer to act magically and functionally and thus automatically."[34] However the technical universe of images is with us, and we must find ways to make it operative towards our own ends. As Joanna Zylinska explains the photographic discourse needs to extend beyond the humanistic confinements in order to embrace new categories of 'visual enhancement, algorithmic logic, and mediated perception'.[35]

CONCLUSION

This article looked at the *operating table*, a custom-made installation that operates alongside Nicosia's Green Line border. The *operating table*, positioned within a contested territory that is highly controlled, aims to—camouflage and mirror the surveillance apparatus of the site. It begins by posing the question of identity within this contested territory, and the

27 Themistokleous, "Keratoconic and (De)formed Vision: Re-thinking the Limits of Perspectival Drawing," in *Drawing: Research, Theory, Practice*, 144.

28 Bergson, 58.

29 Themistokleous, "Keratoconic and (De)formed Vision," 148.

30 Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century*, 122.

31 The drawings by Wheatstone that were used in the initial stereoscopic experiments are published in: Wheatstone, 'Contributions to the Physiology of Vision. Part the First. On some remarkable, and hitherto unobserved, phenomena of binocular vision,' Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society of London 128 (1838), 371-394. "Part the Second … (continued)". *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal* Society of London 142 (1852), 1-17. The date of Wheatstone's publication on the stereoscope was 1838, the date of the invention of the stereoscope itself was 1832.

32 The stereoscopic daguerreotype of Charles Wheatstone, his wife Emma, and their children Charles Pablo, Arthur William Frederick and Florence Caroline was taken by Antoine Claudet (1851-2). The daguerreotype (dimensions: 73 mm x 57 mm) is part of the National Portrait Gallery collection, London, UK. See: https://www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/portrait/mw08491/Sir-Charles-Wheatstone-and-his-family. Accessed 2 April 2019.

33 See: J. Wade, "Charles Wheatstone (1802-1875)", in *Perception*, 269-270; Claudet, "The stereoscope and its photographic applications", 97-99; Collen, "Earliest stereoscopic portraits", *Journal of the Photographic Society* 1, 200; H. J. P. Arnold, *William Henry Fox Talbot: Pioneer of Photography and Man of Science*.

34 Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, 74.

35 Zylinska, *Nonhuman Photography*, 5.

imposition of controls such as the prohibition of photographs on the site. The site is thus identified through the prism of the Panopticon gaze and notions of defensive architecture within urban space. Nonhuman visualities that inform the *operating table*, were then explored by looking at the technical operations and the nuances of these operations. This led to a description of the unexpected visualities that ensue from the *operating table*. It was important to identify how the operating table responds not only to the contested site but also to the automated programming of a photographic apparatus more broadly as identified by Flusser. Latour's hybridisation of humans and nonhumans offered a way to unravel visual entanglements that defy the notion of automation critiqued by Flusser. The next section then focused on the visuality of the stereoscope that is part of the *operating table* and aimed to further explore the hybridisation of human vision and its relation to the nonhuman technical apparatus.

By re-articulating Latour's question, we might ask how can contemporary visualities, such as the ones developed in the *operating table*, "allow the contradictory and controversial nature of matters of concern to be represented?" The aim of this article was to reveal how visual networks simulated through the art installation can pose important questions that deal with identity politics. The question of postcolonial identity in Cyprus is ascribed very clear ethno-nationalist markers. The *operating table* doesn't follow rules, it simulates images that are meant to dismantle prescribed identities, by inducing unexpected juxtapositions of self and environment and creating out of body experiences between self and self-image. The nonhuman thus contributes to the construction of emergent identities. To address the nonhuman, it is useful to turn to the technical object.

For Stiegler, the progress of technological evolution "is accelerated on a scale incommensurable with the former technical systems."[36] Consequently, technological evolution, in Stiegler's *Technics and Time 1,* also accelerates faster than cultural-anthropological evolution. The accelerated transformation of the technical system as matter thus assumes new relations with the human that are differentiated from prior technical systems. The current technological forms of "organized inorganic matter"[37] must now be reconsidered in their coupling with the organism. The organs of sight—the eyes—in the *operating table* are no longer only organisms, they are also *technical organa* [τεχνικά όργανα]. As technical organa they are exteriorized from the body. The organon's capacity for exteriorization assumes expanding connections between organic and inorganic matter. The eyes are thus re-scripted. The technical organa of the eyes thus integrate within their construct the external technical object. In this sense, the eye collapses an i-dentity that is not already hybridized in this system.

36 Stiegler, *Technics and Time, 1*, 42.
37 Stiegler, *Technics and Time, 1*, 70.

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1, 2. *Operation Table*, photograph of one of the four assembled components that comprise the *Operation Table*. Nicosia, 2023. Height 87cm, dimensions variable. Stainless steel rods, water clear cast resin mould with steel components, LCD screens with plexiglass case, DLSR camera with customised plexiglass stereoscopic mirrored lens cap, glass mirrors, steel rings, nuts and bolts.

3. *Operation Table*, photograph of the *Operation Table* near the border wall barricade on Lidinis street (West). Nicosia, 2023. Height 87cm, dimensions variable. Stainless steel rods, water clear cast resin mould with steel components, LCD screens with plexiglass case, glass mirrors, steel rings, wheels, raspberry Pi, wires, nuts and bolts.

4. *Operation Table*, photograph of the *Operation Table* attached to the border wall barricade on Lidinis street (East). Nicosia, 2023. Height 87cm, dimensions variable. Stainless steel rods, water clear cast resin mould with steel components, LCD screens with plexiglass case, glass mirrors, steel rings, wheels, raspberry Pi, wires, nuts and bolts.