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TRUST IN THE BLOCK CHAIN SOCIETY

CIVIC SPACE

VOLUME 53

'THERE'S NO SUCH THING AS SOCIETY, ONLY MEN AND WOMEN'. IF PUBLIC SPACE IS IN RETREAT, UNDER PRESSURE FROM DECADES OF NEOLIBERAL POLICIES, HOW IS SHARED SPACE EVOLVING? CIVIC SPACE BECOMES ACTIVATED ACCORDING TO TIME, IN A SYNAPTIC NEGOTIATION BETWEEN A VARIETY OF ACTORS: HUMANS, ADMINISTRATIVE, TECHNOLOGICAL.

IMAGE FRONT COVER: MARTIN ROEMERS , LANDHI ROAD, QUAIDABAD, KARACHI, PAKISTAN.
IMAGES BACK COVER: GRINDR, CHAPPY, BUMBLE, FRIM, TINDER, WOO, BADOO, KIK, MOMO, HAPPN, SURGE, FIRE, TANTAN.

THE AGENCY OF NETWORKS
ANDRÉS JAQUE

interviewed by Volume

Seated at a pleasant terrace overlooking the Venice Lagoon Andrés Jaque shared with Volume his insights on the agency and accountability of networks. From his research on dating apps like Grindr, Jaque calls attention to the mechanisms of control that are being put in place by digital infrastructures – sometimes without even its own initiators knowing how they operate. He calls for an activism coming from designers and architects that combines 'mild statements with super bold actions'.

Volume: Maybe we can start by asking what civic space means to you.

Andrés Jaque: That question is very much connected to what the urban is today. One feature of today's social settings is that they are not defined by space. Instead, they are defined by networks of exchange and interaction. Entities that are interacting are not necessarily in the same space. That makes it very hard for all the forces that try to operate in reality to be part of the same civic society. The difficulty in defining civil society on the one hand derives from the fact that social actors are on the move and in permanent transition, often exceeding the confines of classical civic societies. Capital, for instance, or many of the people now migrating are not inscribed in the jurisdictions where civil societies emerge. In the case of embryos or the oceanic system, crucial actors within contemporary societies, their scale makes it very difficult to include them in the constrained limits where civil societies operate. It is very difficult to define a relevant notion of what civil society should be nowadays; and the ones we can count on are participated

only by a tiny number of the forces that form societies. The case of Europe is paradigmatic in this regard. Migrants and refugees can only participate in the discussions held within the EU by advocates who speak on their behalf. But they themselves don't occupy a space in parliaments or public institutions. They even have huge difficulty making themselves heard within the context of NGOs. All this makes it difficult to operate now with the terms and vocabulary that we inherited from the 20th century. States are now in crisis and the structures of both power and marginality are escaping the location of state jurisdictions. Civic space, as a concept and as an institution, is no longer a useful vocabulary because we don't know what space is any more, and we definitely know that the civic today is a very exclusive club where much of society will never belong.

Volume: So do we need new terminology or do we need new structures?

AJ: Both. We need different terminology, because it is not possible to access realities we don't even know how to talk about. But on the other hand, the question is how we hold current technologies of interaction accountable. For instance, my research on Grindr ended with a conclusion: Grindr is a momentous infrastructure of society-making today, operating at a global scale, but in itself it is a totally non-scrutinized milieu. Even the 92 people who are managing it, updating it, ruling it from their offices in West Hollywood have no idea what is going on with the infrastructure that they keep in circulation. Grindr, an online platform for LTBGQ interaction initially designed as a hookup facilitator, after a short but intense evolution became a platform for lifestyle, entertainment, market and data collection. As a result of its great success in mediating one-to-one relationships, the app ended regulating the way gay communities were normalized in western countries. At the same time, it provided opportunities for gay men to be tracked and attacked in places under homophobic rule. In western countries, Grindr helped to dequeer gayness, by promoting one-to-one relationships among cool young stylish people, and to undermine the networks of interaction that resulted from the HIV/Aids crises. A community that was very solid in its relational capital became atomized and depended on a privately owned technology, and it is run by a company that doesn't even have the means to monitor the political dimensions of the role they are playing.

Volume: But who is introducing this agency to it then? Is that the company or the shareholders?

AJ: Basically, it is a result of the circulation of the app. I will give you some examples of the app's relevance: This platform was used in Egypt by the police to track accumulations of gay people in the city. Since the app reveals the actual location of users, three policemen could use their cell phones to track and detain users through trilateration. At the same time, it was used in Syria and beyond by refugees to navigate and find activists who would help them on their way to safe environments. The platform itself is so embedded in people's lives that it ended up having an agency that no one planned for the app to have. It depends on the way users and technology negotiate the modes of association that bring them together. This agency is the result of a trajectory of association. It is not the direct result of the intention that motivated the design.

Volume: But then you are entering the realm of access and control. And to relate back to civic society as a larger notion, you mentioned the presence of a certain group in relation to civil society. How does that play out at the level of control?

AJ: In the case of Grindr, that is very clear. It started as a small kind of activist project. The founder saw it as a service to fellow gay men, but it ended up as a way to mine data that was sold to third parties. The lack of political scrutiny of the fundamental infrastructures that society lives by calls for a collective move to render technologies accountable. A new move, such as the one Hannes Meyer went through to bring architecture and design into a society committed to the public and to welfare. This won't come from the managers of these global-investor-owned platforms. It is something that needs to come from other sides, from the sides of critique, associative movements or activism, and then these platforms might provide alternative notions of what 'civic spaces' could be like now. Notions of the 'civic' that include, for instance, the refugees that are traveling through Europe and that have no right to vote. And not only people but also ecosystems, next generations and many more social forces whose voice is needed to make infrastructures like Grindr critical.

IT IS THE CONNECTION BETWEEN ONLINE AND OFFLINE WHERE ARCHITECTURE DEVELOPS PROJECTS OF URBANITY, OF POLICY, OF ACCOUNTABILITY

The same goes for the digital management of large-scale resources. Right now, as part of the project 'Sex and the So-Called City' that we recently presented as an exhibition in New York, we have been studying in detail the recent evolution of digital platforms by which industrial infrastructures and natural resources have been reconstructed in the distance as stable assets. Investors can easily track what is the evolution of their investment in mineral and industrial shares. Right now, there are mines in Chile that are managed from a distance by investors through platforms like Predix, developed by Baker Hughes together with General Electric in the last five years following the model developed by Grindr. In the same way, Grindr users are using their fingers on the borosilicate screen of the cell phones to touch the photographs of naked bodies, investors are doing the same with mineral assets. Assets are sexualized, as part of the project of being digitalized. The scale of this transformation is huge. In the past industrial assets were managed through the geography and architecture of colonialism. Now they are managed by networks of a tiny part of the human population (around 2%) and a massive machine mobilization. They are ruled by non-logic-led ecosystems of intelligences moved by digital arousal and contingency. My interest is to intervene these contexts to bring effective political guarantees to them.

Volume: But control has a double meaning: there is being in control and being controlled.

AJ: Yes, and discussing the way these contexts of power can incorporate plurality, diversity or resistance is crucial in addressing how they are driven, governed and controlled. We now see an extreme neoliberal management of these crucial spaces of co-existence, which triggers an extremely unequal distribution of power that causes an unequal distribution of the benefits.

In Saudi Arabia, Grindr and other hookup apps became a tool for the religious moral police to track people expressing themselves as gay. They are taken to Cell 18 in the overcrowded Braiman Prison, a very particular gallery with lights on 24/7 and webcams everywhere so that the men taken there are exposed as gay to the world. Online profiling is now an arena where political guarantees are disputed.

Architecture and design occupy a very relevant space in these disputes. Architecture has a long tradition of regulating urbanity, even more so in Europe, where we administer the legacy of welfare states that shaped the Europe of the second half of the 20th century. We cannot postpone the reactivation of that legacy in the current platforms where interaction is now accommodated. It is no longer the square or the playground where contemporary politics happen. It is the connection between online and offline interaction that is now at stake. It is there where architecture develops projects of urbanity, of policy, of accountability.

Volume: Do you see glimpses of that?

AJ: Yes, and they face the fact that the evaluation of their ethical trajectories is not easy. It is crucial to credit the importance of daily forms of activism. For instance, we have studied the case of Elias Papadopoulos, an electrical engineer who used his 5,000 euros savings to build a self-sustaining Wi-Fi hub inside a trailer at the Idomeni refugee camp in Greece. Many of the 13,000 refugees then living there had smartphones, but did not have money for overpriced SIMcards, so they seldom used their phones. We had long conversations with Fareed, a young Syrian gay man, who arrived at Idomeni after a long journey that had started in Kabul in October 2015. He benefited from Papadopoulos's internet system and got in touch through Grindr with LGBTQ activists who helped him navigate across Europe and get a job in the Netherlands.

It is of a great significant for this discussion of the work of numerous NGOs in the Mediterranean in developing technologies and legal frames to support refugees and migrants crossing the Mediterranean. The use of online communication and protocols to promote communication between people migrating and NGO members is reconstructing the oceanic system, and it can be seen as a testing ground that gives hope for the capacity for societies to reorganize. To continue the previous discussion, this is not really civil society, because NGOs are part of that civil society, but then they need to negotiate with technologies, groups of refugees, climate and sea systems and even the smugglers, which are not included in the institutions that civil societies live by.

Architects like the aspects of Forensic Oceanography that are operating in this context, as shown at Manifesta 12 in Palermo that I co-curated. As a field, we find an opportunity to gain relevance by confronting these arenas.

Volume: Certainly. But there is another challenge and that is the notion of space itself. Because you started out by saying that the notion of civic space is not related to space as we know it, but that it is dispersed and that is not how architects understand space.

AJ: Totally right. I think that the work of Rob Nixon, who wrote a book called *Slow Violence* in 2013, is very important in understanding what is happening now. None of these realities is happening in a single location and none of them is steered by one single operator where we can intervene. They are part of processes that take long periods of time to develop and might happen at microscopical or planetary scales. The only way to have a say in them is through collaboration. Any work now gains its relevance in the collaboration between agents capable of operating at different scales and within different timeframes. The only way to confront Frontex's (European Border and Coast Guard Agency) strategies to move the EU frontier to the south, by involving other countries, territorializing technologies, mobilizing landscapes non-crossable bands, local networks of smugglers as surveillance agents or decision maker's ideologies, is to respond with a combination of actions symmetrical in its heterogeneity to the actions Frontex combines.

WE ARE PART OF THE SYSTEM WE WANT TO CONFRONT, AND THAT IS A UNIQUE CONTEMPORARY CONDITION

We started the Office for Political Innovation with the idea to bring people with different backgrounds together in common action, discussion and pedagogy. I've also been discussing this with my colleagues at Columbia University, and we often agree that the relevance of our field depends on this.

Volume: People like Keller Easterling say that there is a violent binary on Facebook, for instance, between likes and dislikes. I was wondering if a space for architecture can be the digital interface – the regulatory body between relations.

AJ: Individuals and groups are now shaped and divided by the way they relate to digital interaction. A huge part of our society emerged as digital players in a binary relationship with technology and do not have access to the critical tools that would enable them to perform as citizens. But it is also true that part of society is becoming very savvy in navigating social media. In our research on social media, it took us a lot of effort to track the way users often develop forms to avoid using digital platforms in the way these platforms are designed to be used, as a sort of emancipation from the rigidity and predetermination that platforms provide. Digital literacy is now passing a point in social and political emancipation. It is a new notion of class distinction.

Volume: Do you think this, at the core, is a different kind of segregation to the way that social classes were divided in the past?

AJ: Radical ideas that were meant to be emancipatory in the 1960s and 70s have been appropriated by different forces to now become tools of control and segregation. In New York, as we presented in 'Sex and the So-Called City', the discourse of people like Bloomberg was based on arguments that were highly popular within the progressive movement of the 1960s and 1970s in New York.

He claimed to be greening the city, by reducing its pollution and increasing the number of trees, making its water

bodies swimmable etc — all of them goals that most people could not disagree with. In order to do that, his administration centralized the wastewater treatment. By doing that, the future transformability of wastewater treatment infrastructure would be blocked. Whereas networked infrastructures allow for reorganization, centralized ones require massive investments to be altered. The huge cost of transforming the system into a centralized one inspired the city's government to 'be creative' in attracting capital. So the Bloomberg administration became very tolerant in calculating air rights. A simple move that changed the whole real estate market of the city prompted the emergence of slender high-end apartment towers in the city. There were many similar properties containing apartments with views of the park, but there are very few apartments where you can go up and have what Harry Macklowe, developer of 432 Park Avenue, called 'helicopter views'. New ways to calculate air rights, a very architectural thing, introduced de facto a premium high-end market, overlapped on the city, which together with the allowance to use LLCs as shell companies to hide the owner of real estate properties, and tax exemption, etc. rendered New York as a new form of governance, a *highendcracy*, based on the possibility to install territorial inequality on the East coast. All that is connected with the greening the city. Something that seems to resound with the return to nature and pseudo-hippy movements of the 1960s and 1970s.

This goes to the very details of the architecture. The windows in 432 Park Avenue cannot be opened. The Austrian Eckelt Lite-Wall glass in the building's 2,136 windows, each 10by10 foot, became the most expensive component of the building by far. Eckelt Lite-Wall glass intensifies the blue range of the light spectrum, making the sky seem bluer than it actually is by making the brownish nitrogen dioxide in the air invisible. The architecture is here shaped in its very detailing to provide visual evidence of New York as a green and clean environment, ready to accommodate *highendcracy*.

But then where did the pollution go? It has been smoothly territorially redistributed. In June 2012, under Bloomberg's mandate, the New York City Department of Environmental Protection announced a $100 million plan to convert New York oil-based

heating infrastructures to natural gas. The New York City Clean Heat Program dropped the city's sulfur dioxide level by 68%, its nitric oxide by 24%, nitrogen dioxide by 21%, and particulate matter by 16%. Since 2010, based on severe concerns for public health, fracking has been fully banned in New York State.[1] Paradoxically, since that moment, the percentage of energy consumed in New York fueled by natural gas has continued to grow, now reaching an increase of 50%. Because it cannot be extracted in New York, it is extracted somewhere else, mainly in Pennsylvania. Since 2010, the volume of natural gas extracted in Pennsylvania has multiplied tenfold. With 9,775 active unconventional wells operating in the Marcellus Shale, the state now reaches an annual volume of 5,313,258 million cubic feet of natural gas extractions. In 2015, the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection issued an air quality alert in Susquehanna Valley. In 2012, as air quality in New York improved, it declined in Pennsylvania: nitrogen dioxide levels increased by 20%, sulfur dioxide by 30%, and fine particulate matter by 56%.

That was a design strategy to move the atmospheric pollution from New York to Susquehanna Valley. It is nice that the water is clean and that people can kayak on the Hudson River. But in order to understand the transformation New York has gone through in recent years, it is necessary to understand that life expectancy in Susquehanna Valley is dropping very rapidly.

Volume: Does that also relate to the current situation where architects are only involved at a very late stage of the development?

AJ: Many architectural practices, as we do at the Office for Political Innovation, are moving away from models based on waiting for clients to come and give an assignment. Instead, we are part of an alternative wave of practices that work as associative networks in which architects collaborate with other forces, knowledge and interests.

We recently won a competition for the architecture of the Contemporary Art Museum CA2M in Madrid. The museum was discussing ways to gain new spaces to operate. Instead of demolishing and replacing the existing building with a cool new one, we proposed to transform the existing building, enrolling on that artist and museum users, in a three-year program of musealization of CA2M's building site, that would remain open to the public during almost the entire process. As an alternative to the common move of demolishing and replacing the existing building, this considerably reduced the environmental and economic impact that it would have implied. As a long-term project opened to the public, the process kept and even strengthened the social capital of the museum.

It has been a very challenging process, since it was difficult to find a good legal framework in which it could happen with guarantees. If you want to open a building site to the public, which is not easy from a legal point of view, you need to make visitors go through a training workshop, they would have to wear protection clothes, etc. All these requirements make sense, because no one wants visitors to get hurt. So quite a lot of adjustments were necessary to make it possible.

After three years, we are now in the final phase, and they did not close for a single day, and the building has been massively transformed.

Volume: If you compare this example to, for instance, the MACBA museum, which has the most natural skate ramps around the building but people are not allowed to use them, that is almost the opposite.

AJ: Right, and that would be amazing, to open it up to the skaters.

Volume: Maybe one more element. You are critical yet optimistic. Now we are resurfacing from a financial crisis that hit our profession quite hard. You saw a renewed ambition in the profession and in schools to find relevance in new kinds of practices and invent new ways of working. But now that the crisis is apparently over and the demand is rising again, you see the tendency to fall back into old habits.

AJ: I have two responses. The first one is towards the architectural profession. Architecture has a big role in empowering the remaining forces that are subjugating large parts of our society. So we see many architects that are a-critically producing great damage. We see architects collaborating with dynamics that are creating social segregation. They are selling seriousness and self-consciousness as a way of not accepting that they are reinforcing dominant powers that are in need of being questioned. When you see, for instance, the architecture behind the European austerity measures, you see an architecture that is really expensive to produce and not austere at all. It is also indulgent with itself, performing in solemnity and seriousness, as a way to claim its supposed connection with austerity not as a fact but as a moralistic style.

I am inclined to react with humor or even parody to this immense and harmful contradiction.

A second response has to do with the fact that we cannot put ourselves out of the ecosystem of guilt now. We are part of the system we want to confront, and that is a unique contemporary condition. We have to find a way to respond to a reality we are complaisant with. That doesn't allow for pure positions. We cannot claim the truth or a position that knows it all. That also made me use humor as tool. We are privileged people and we are part of it. Still, we need to criticize, but without preaching too much. Humor is a way of making clear we were not on one side of a line that we knew it all and the rest was wrong. The nature of violence now is not so clear. The previous postwar generation still had the power to say: this was wrong and we are going to do it differently.

Volume: True but doesn't that create a position where the actors become so aware of their position, that they are so modest and careful that they don't dare take a stand? It can become also too modest or small to achieve something.

AJ: I agree the stances have to be radical and consistent, but that doesn't mean they have to be manifestos. We need moves, occupying space and doing things in another way. That is produced through actions and evidence. I think we need mild statements and super bold actions and risky stances we can commit to.

1. https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2014/dec/17/new-york-state-fracking-ban-two-years-public-health