

An interview with Nina Roth and Paolo Cirio from check-check.org

<http://www.occupiedlondon.org/checkcheck>

Paolo Cirio and Nina Roth are the people behind check-check.org, a project "designed to deprogram people from the security theatre at airports". How do they plan to do this? In their own words, deprogramming is a sort of debugging of the social code that is given to us since we were born. In the airport case the social code is the script of "Security Theater" or the "Theater of the Absurd" that is a spectacle in a grand scale done around the world. The deprogrammer "Check-Check.org" operates with a friendly psychological method: everyone can read the experiences, feelings, emotions and unpredictable behaviors of other mind-controlled 'victims'. So with more consciousness and less embarrassment, because others already unclenched, people generally open up to each other, expressing their self-doubts about their existence and reality. Everyone can share opinions and find confirmations; a practice as an antidote to deceptive brainwashing and a return to a free mind.

Here at Occupied London we are also intrigued by airports. These non-places of Augé (1995), emblematic of a liquid society re-constructing itself around fear while constantly on the move, precursors of a social reality that is already here, long-arrived in their runways and arrival halls. A reality that keeps going further. Imagine: "Ladies and gentlemen, please fasten your seat belts, we shall be shortly landing onto non-places endlessly springing up, encroaching the urban entity and reshaping its reality -creating, in fact, a reality of a new type". And lowering the microphone, he whispers: "...a reality some of us want dead already".

The airport becomes increasingly important the more the supermarket, the mall, the library, the pavement and the street come to resemble it. Yet, as pointed out in the interview, airport security initially copied the urban, even if it was the urban in its "state of exception", i.e. when cities were, or felt to be, under attack. In so doing the airport acts as an intra-urban time hub: it connects the urban state of exception to what would pass for normality. For this it needs our attention and we are grateful to Nina and Paolo for pointing to its direction and for kindly giving us the interview that follows._

[Occupied London] What is it that intrigues you about airports – what blows your mind away in these spaces?

[Paolo Cirio] Low-cost airlines, the global tourism industry, migrants and new youth lifestyles are some of the main causes of the boom in flights, airports and connected infrastructures. Indeed, while airports become a place crossed by a mass of people, at the same time they are becoming a media, to the point where we can now talk of a new "mass media". Often we study the power of images, TV propaganda and

newspapers' news coverage, but we don't think about other types of media, media that we often perform more than we listen, read or watch in our daily lives. The idea of "check-check.org" was born when I saw the mass of people repeating absurd acts; they simply obey a symbolic "mise-en-scène". Most people are probably aware of the absurdity and the uselessness of security checks but they simply follow laws and rules without even thinking of the possibility of rising up against them. Is this not then, a sort of training aiming to sabotage the sense of reality by inserting fabricated truths which are manifestly lies? It's different from other kind of theories about effect of media operandi. In this case it is not the depiction of reality with strategic use of information and of communication (classical mass media, with images, videos, rhetoric, etc.) that gives us a lack of meaning, but it is in fact reality itself which is directly dramatized and forced in a meaningless representation. The definition of torture given by the CIA is a good metaphor of how contemporary propaganda strategies work: "Torture is a set of techniques designed to put prisoners into a state of deep disorientation and shock in order to force them to make concessions against their will"[1]. We are under psychological torture provided by "semiological signs" tools.

[Nina Rorth] I love the promises I get at airports: the assumed possibility of going wherever I want to and everyone else can do so as well, those consuming all those glittering shops - and you are right there, and just because you take a flight you think you are able to afford all this stuff... and then, after a while, I start thinking and start getting bored and scared and I turn aggressive and nervous, I feel persecuted and betrayed - all at the same place in nearly the same moment. There are so many individuals crossing, all with different destinations, diverse backgrounds - it's quite a sci-fi moment that I have while being at airports or even thinking of them. Talking of our project, the security measures appear to be absolutely absurd: one day this, the other day that, right behind the "checkpoint" you may purchase most products that someone took away from you minutes ago - where's the sense in all that?

[OL] Corporate media reported the following story: "Robert Dziekanski was a Polish worker who was tasered to death by police at Vancouver International Airport in Canada. Robert was migrating to Canada to reunite with his mother, who spent over ten hours waiting for him in the airport's reception lounge. Only a couple of meters away her son was being assassinated by the police". The way we understand it, the title of your project - "I killed a girl called reality" - implies that a state of emergency is in place in the airport, where "reality" as we know it elsewhere dies. And yet, Dziekanski's death was as real - and tragic - as that of De Menezes (the Brazilian commuter shot dead by London's Metropolitan Police). Does reality as we know it die exclusively in the airport, or does it die everywhere?

[NR] I guess we intended to speak about reality in general. I, for example, have the impression of not knowing why I do stuff, why I react on certain issues and not on others that concern my personal reality. Speaking of structural reality - I don't know that either. Everything seems to be constructed: which TV series are shown, what sort of popcorn you can buy, why some people can cross a border and others can't and why there are stateless people who have to live for years in the transit areas of airports. So in fact airports are like a mini-world and so to this mini-world all the

measures to fight terrorism or whatever are applied and you see and feel it immediately, without any filter, pretty raw. So the answer might be: reality already died, or it was never alive anywhere.

[PC] Paulo Virilio in his book 'City of Panic' has written: "Whence the sudden permutation in which the INFOWAR appears not only as a 'war of weaponry' but especially as a WAR ON THE REAL; a war entailing full-scale annihilation of the sense of reality in which the 'weapon of mass communication' is strategically superior to the 'weapon of mass destruction', whether atomic, chemical or bacteriological... And so, after 'war tactics' like camouflage and various lures capable of hoodwinking the enemy, the main stratagem suddenly becomes the 'speeding up of reality' creating a panic-induced movement that destroys our sense of orientation, in other words, our view of the world".[2]

In this way, everything has a symbolic impact and reality was killed everywhere, it's the main tragic crime of our age. I don't want to appear cynical but the two assassinations that you've cited were probably no accidents, or in any case they were useful if only in order to seek consensus for the "state of emergency", which translates into immense instability, permanent danger and crisis, and henceforth panic for any citizen. The assassinations of Dziekanski and De Menezes were symbolic acts (as is terrorism in general): Of course they are tragic, but the function is in the level of representation, not about real physical repression, like in a riot or in a war. I think they have been sacrificed for the purposes of "terror hysteria" propaganda: yes, this is in the sphere of hyperreality and for this reason, it's even more sad.

I want to make clear that hyperreality, although just a tactic in order to manage public opinion of citizens of countries who are involved in wars –abroad it is about the citizens of countries under attack, about the brutality of violence on bodies, which is terribly strong. Reality is a serious thing missed in our mind, but it still exists somewhere. We should be thinking about the final goals of power (capitalism and their administrators), its tools and reasons of existence. What I mean by this is that if a way exists in order to stabilize reality in the culture of common values and if we work around media and its message, we will no longer be shields for bombs. But if right now the reality is just the "annihilation of the reality", which reality shall we kill? Have we tried to kill the worst with our consciences? With the right weapons? I ask myself this question every day.

[OL] In 'Splintering Urbanism', Graham and Marvin mention that in London, "the so-called 'Ring of Steel' supports electronic surveillance systems and armed guards on every entry point into the financial district. Cars entering have their number plates read automatically. Stolen cars are detected within three seconds. And the potential for the facial-recognition of drivers, by linking automatically to digitised photographs on national licence records, exists in the system and has recently been tested." This again raises the question of how unique the airport is in its "state of emergency" features. Only a few weeks ago it was announced that most of Britain's train

stations, for example, will be getting baggage scanning facilities similar to those found in airports. Is it the city, then, that is being airportised?

[NR] Of course the airport isn't unique in its "state of emergency" features. For example, in Germany for the male soccer world cup 2006 the police, and with them the politicians (or vice versa), were using material and strategies to be prepared for any "emergencies". That meant controlling people, not permitting assumed dangerous people to leave their houses, re-establishing border controls, using cameras, scan machines, rfid-chips, secret service information, establishing data files without people knowing about it etc. I suppose it was just to get used to the devices and maybe even having the topic appear once in the media, so that next time it is applied it won't be such a big issue anymore. The G8 summit, its protests and the police reaction made this quite evident. I don't actually know where and when so-called security measures were first applied but I guess it had something to do with property, so the question we should ask might be: Who owns the place we are staying and we are filmed at? Why can he/she do so? What are the possibilities to counter-act? "I killed a girl called reality" just wants to inform that there is such a "state of emergency" but in terms of freedom. Additionally the project tries to outline, with its interactive features, that there are more people who realize the problem. We are not alone!

[OL] "...in the early days of airports, there was no such thing as the rivers of passengers that flow through the sculpted steel and glass façades of contemporary terminal buildings (...) The huge milelong terminal structures are carefully built to facilitate the mobility of passengers, baggage, and cargo to their destination. To ensure the security of the country the flows are entering, while at the same time to protect the very means of their travel, these flows must be watched and controlled. The airport is well and truly a space under surveillance."

Here, Adey (2004) implies that the transformation of the airport coincides with its growth and that together with the flux of the populations came the need to tighten the surveillance of these spaces of mobility. Is it the airport, then that is being urbanised?

[PC] Hakim Bey has written: "Our architecture has become symbolic, we have enclosed ourselves in the manifestations of abstract thought"[3] Airports are urbanized as much as other public places of our modernity, at the end becoming "non-places", to use the term of Marc Augè. I'm ever impressed by how any airport has the same architectural structures, interior design, functionality infrastructures and even the same shops with the same products. They simply look like shopping centres, but in a place completely out of history, geographically not located and culturally not recognized. The airport is the pure new urbanism abstracted from our heritage, it's the triumph of the pure consumerist world and the controlled society, indeed the perfect place in order to have everyone's mind and body under control. It's very well explained with the words of Virilio in his book 'The Information Bomb': "The 'real city', which is situated in a precise place and in which gave its name to

the politics of notions, is giving way to the 'virtual city' that de-territorialized meta-city which in hence to become the site of that 'metropolititics', the totalitarian or rather globalitarian character of which will be plain for all see".[4]. In terms of security measures in the urban environment, we know that the first check-points were there before airplanes, so airports have been urbanized and militarized to look like towns and borders in war time.

[OL] You ask: "...and what about the not-scanned suitcases – aren't they blowing your mind?" They are indeed. Waiting at that never-ending queue, ordered to drop your coffee while your suitcase is swiftly transferred to the aircraft without a glitch. And yet most people will not react to such a contradiction. It is done for the sake of safety, they say – all they need do is to say that, and passengers will obey. Isn't that blowing your mind?

[PC] Well, and what about the not-checked CIA's secret flights in Europe (like the "extraordinary rendition program" - Trevor Paglen has done some brilliant work on that), and what about the corruption of administrators and employees at airports - aren't they blowing your mind? I've been informed of illicit traffic at airports, employers stealing everything (a common scandal in Italy) and criminal organizations often using corrupt employees in order to ship all sorts of stuff - yet the largest corruption comes, of course, from the top of the pyramid. We can find contradictions everywhere, but yes, our project would focus on the "security theatre" as a form of spin and on the reactions of people when facing manifested absurdities.

[NR] It is, absolutely. And I guess right there a strategy fulfills itself which I can't really grasp and which I don't really understand either. An obeying mass is easier to handle, of course, and if there are more and more people, strategies need to be established that will get them buying, get them smooth, get them obeying – if Prozac can't do it, a well constructed explanation might help. When I was fourteen, on the envelope of every letter, instead of my name I wrote a saying I once heard in a movie (or read in a book or heard in a song), which was: question everything.

[OL] What is the response of people writing to check-check.org so far?

[NR] We had some nice feedback that hasn't been published on the website. Some was on the topic itself - a lot of people told me their personal stories that they didn't dare to leave in a comment, but the ones who left a story were from all over the world, some more bizarre than others. Some comments were on the music (which was composed specifically for the project) and others highlighted that there are more problems to be solved and more urgent security issues; in Germany something like the new passports with biometric data or new laws on saving online data for half a year. So there's still some work to do...

[PC] Right now we have visitors from all continents and from over fifty countries. The website is just a tool for sharing impressions and experiences around the world, but to be honest, I have heard and seen the best stories directly at the airport. I enjoy seeing the faces of the people while they act out absolutely absurd things, when they become angry about the confiscated bottle of water and when they have to have their shoes checked. We want to do a movie, a sort of documentary about it, so we are looking for producers... The topic is ever more in discussion, as can be seen by the research paper by a team at the Harvard School of Public Health, published on 20 Dec '07:

"Researchers could not find any studies showing whether the time-consuming process of X-raying carry-on luggage prevents hijackings or attacks. They also found no evidence to suggest that making passengers take off their shoes and confiscating small items prevented any incidents"[5].

[OL] Having recently visited London, can you describe your experiences of the city?

[PC] I was in London on 7 July '05, so I saw the panic in the streets the weeks after. Inspiration for "check-check" probably came from this experience - during those days I did a fake "Public Notice" label around East London in Banksy's style, with these words: THIS IS A HIGH PARANOIA AREA. If you suffer from fear, anxiety, panic, please support our troops in Iraq or buy something."

Recently, Prime Minister Gordon Brown said that Britain would begin improving its security systems at train stations, airports, utility buildings and other crowded or strategic places to decrease its vulnerability to terrorist attacks. But any kind of new anti-terrorist plans are "largely ineffective and they come at an enormous expense, both monetarily and in loss of privacy" in the words of Bruce Schneier who has introduced the idea of the "Security Theater"[6]. Additionally, the lack of prevention of previous attacks is proof of the inefficacy of surveillance systems. Again, I see the hype of anti-terror measures as an internal PYOPS strategy aiming to raise consensus in war, spreading the culture of fear and tighten control over citizens' lives. One example: While measures in the '70s against European's terrorism in cold war time and measures for contemporary radical Islamic's terrorism are incomparable, at the same time, the number of terrorist attacks today is smaller. It's just one of millions of contradictions. When in London, I always think of the movies "Brazil" by Terry Gilliam and "Children of Men" of Alfonso Cuarón.

[1]

The Shock Doctrine, Page 24, Naomi Klein, 2007, Knopf, ISBN 9780676978001

[2]

City of Panic, Page 34, By Paul Virilio, 2005, Berg, ISBN 1845202244

[3]

Hakim Bey, 'The information war', Ctheory, 18 (1), 1995

Virtual Futures, Page 5, By Joan Broadhurst Dixon, Eric J. Cassidy, 1998, Routledge, ISBN 0415133793

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The Information Bomb, Page 11, By Paul Virilio, 1998, Galileè, ISBN 1844670597

[5]

Reuters, 21 Dec 2007, the whole research is available here

[6]

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