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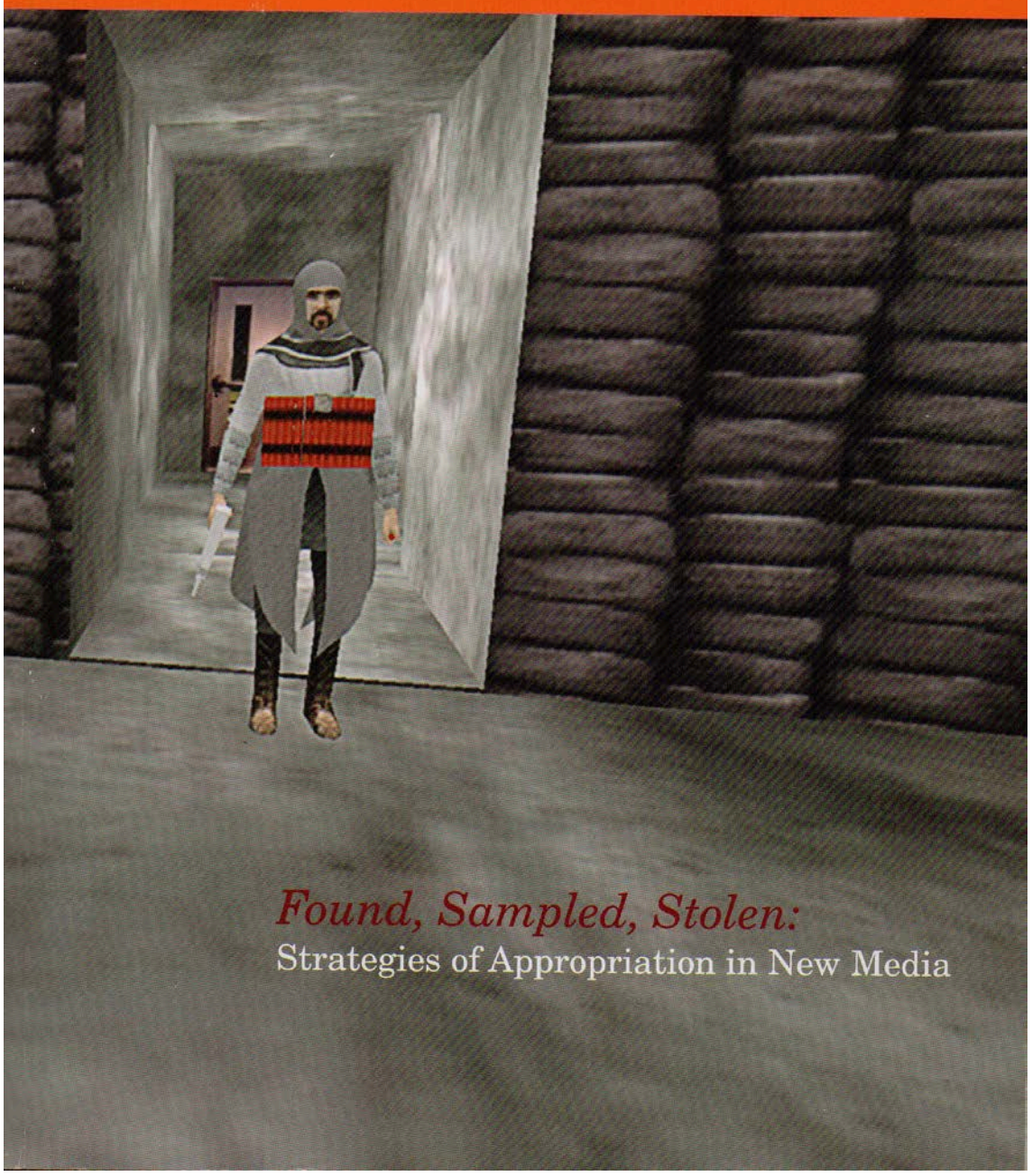

Found, Sampled, Stolen:
Strategies of Appropriation in New Media

MAGnetismo - gendered unspoken imprint in a second life

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Ten years ago Argentina experienced an institutional crisis that was a turning point for most of us. The realization that as a result of this crisis the country found itself devoid of a national project made citizens react and think more deeply about what kind of country we wanted.

"Proyecto AbRiGo" (the warm-up project) emerged from this economic turning point. It considered technology as a subject of exploration investigating questions with many possible answers – an approach that seemed the most interesting to us. We worked with technology's processes, languages, mechanisms, systems, circuits, and interfaces – in addition to abstract fields that have a place in modern machines and that connect it with its past. Furthermore, we developed a set of strategies to make the project inclusive of those who had no previous knowledge of technology. This was done in order to circumvent the digital divide that results from lack of accesses to technology in certain economic groups in our country, and to imbue the technology-based project with socially viable meaning.

Blanket, 2012, © Andrea Varela

Technology represents the state-of-the-art, something you need to know about in order to reach the next step in the ladder. The natural consequence of this mindset is that those who have no access to technology –because of low income or educational level– are excluded. Although this problem may have been solved in developed countries, it has not been resolved in many South American countries, and certainly not in Argentina, where I live.

With this in mind, we took it upon ourselves to tackle this technology divide problem by creating a project that would bring the community into relationship with textiles and technology. The objective was to develop weaving skills to support the growth of a creative grass-root economy. We articulated that mechanized looms are the ancestors of the first computers. The conceptual links with textiles extend the notions of connectivity and network, pixel and point, link and lace, just to mention some of the known relationships. In doing so, we constructed a connective path between the affectivity of weaving as expression of memory and identity, and the digital world that for some was unknown and filled with apprehension.

Semiautomatic Loom, 2012, © Andrea Varela

Meanwhile, as the project grew and people began to show interest in our work; our space grew larger; we received funds to continue working, and our place became somewhat of a museum, a studio, and a lecture room. Our vision was realized. A citizen could learn, create, research, and produce in our space –all of these functions within the same walls.

At first, family and friends donated their old technological and non-technological discards. In the course of several months other people followed suit. Soon enough, the question that cropped up was what to do with the goods collected? I shared this question with academics at the *Universidad Nacional de Tres de Febrero* and suggested creating MAGnestimO, a program to re-use technological and industrial discards. The idea was embraced, and a program of work was established in order to reduce the environmental impact produced by technological waste.

Among the goals of this program I would like to mention the following:

- University discarded technology –due to its obsolete status– would be reused to create new, useful and artistic objects.

- Environmental impact studies would be conducted on each of the components of the e-waste.

- Specifications would be developed on the conditions necessary to make good use of technological discards.

- Distinctions would be made about which components could be used in the creation of new objects and which were toxic and should be disposed of.

- Systematization of techniques used in technological reuse would be developed in order to educate children, youngsters, and adults on attitudes that will enhance environmental consciousness.

- Publication of a technological handbook with instructions for disassembling would be created for use by institutions and by citizens who wish to know how to deal with e-waste.

- Commitment to working with people and with institutions who share these goals would be instrumental.

MAGnetismO - its origin

Moving on to the origin of MAGnetismO, it should be said that it was named this way, because magnetism is a fascinating phenomenon present in nature and animals as well as in electronic devices. This is further illustrated in the following story.

The program began a few years ago, when some of the women involved in the project began to play with resistors. A resistor is a tiny object made of carbon and other resistive elements to reduce the electric current flow. In our hands the resistor became a ring. And later on, a capacitor became part of a pin. Over the course of time, the same thing happened with many other components. Female skills to repair, reshape, simulate and soften things, as well as skills to sew and knit, were key to creating these objects, all of which were constructed as puzzles.

Taking into account that the entertaining aspect of computers attracts many men, I thought that men might be called upon to participate in the project, but even though men attended the first meeting and entry has always been unrestricted, only women have enrolled in the program during the five years that the project has existed.

Interestingly, although weaving is an activity practiced impeccably by many men in Argentina's provinces, in the urban environment, women are the main proponents in this area. Historically, women have woven their children's trousseaux –their blankets and household ornaments– which have filled the windows of our antique stores in abundance in recent years. Maybe this historically based shared experience amongst women is the factor that encouraged women to join in the program, and discouraged men from doing so.

These stereotyped gender interests might also indicate that technology is aimed at male tastes. The reason may be related to the engineering aspect that rules the body of technology because of its implicit mathematics and its metal aesthetics closer to the cold and hard skin of a robot, than to the soft skin of a smiling doll; but also because of the splinters of war that gave birth to the technology in the first place. These factors are still visible through some of its turns of language and encrypted processes.

This unspoken imprint is embedded in the great majority of the population in our workshops. Seventy percent of the women who join us are over fifty years old and are housewives with little exposure to working outside the household. Many of these women have fought to get a hold of –and master– the TV remote control at home, only to find that gaining such access left them just as isolated, sitting alone in their own living rooms for long periods of time. Why would they now fight to gain access to a computer mouse? What would be gained? What might they find beyond the mouse and screen that would empower them?

What they actually gain in our program is the knowledge that at some point they will come across some *men's stuff* and that they will finally learn what all of this 'tech' business is all about. Further, when they gain an understanding that what they learn relates to what their own children already know, they become deeply involved with the class and this encourages communal engagement in the project.

In the class, 2012, © Andrea Varela

In as much as none of them will ever be devoted to programming (coding) –and I wish to clarify that this has never been the goal of the program– these connections make them feel that they can participate and 'weave,' at least conceptually, the world in which the young are immersed. Now, almost any component of the discarded, obsolete, machines we break up become a great passport to build real ties between women and the physicality of the technology.

E-waste and the "Aparato" workshops

E-waste (Waste Electrical Electronic Equipment) includes all electrical and electronic equipment approaching the end of "useful life" when it then becomes waste. That is to say, anything that plugs in and requires electricity, such as appliances and computers, which we all have plenty of at home, will eventually become e-waste. However, many of these products can be reused, recycled, or restored. It is currently estimated that at least twenty to fifty million e-waste is produced worldwide annually. It is almost 8% of Solid Urban Waste. WEEE is the type of waste that has the highest growth rate in the world –it has increased three times faster than average urban waste. This is because of the dump design that produces large volumes of waste.

The questions that emerge out of this practice are: who will deal with the object when it completes its cycle and becomes e-waste? And, where is the dumpster in which it should be discarded?

In countries where governments do not yet manage e-waste, citizens must become domestic operators. However, such a position does not come with a handbook that tells you what to do with the e-waste, or a map that tells you where the dumpster is located for you to trash your e-waste. So, MagnetismO seeks to reach homes in our community to share these ideas and information through "Aparato" –second life-equipment workshops.

To achieve this goal, we share the findings of current research on environmental impact conducted by students and educators at the School of Engineering, Universidad Nacional de Tres de Febrero. We reveal the secrets of disassembling electronic devices and how to manage e-waste, and we distribute instruction manuals called "Technological Disassembling Handbooks," to schools, teachers and students in Argentina to encourage creative processes of technology discard re-use as well as the creation of useful new objects, or pieces of art.

LED lamp and fabric, 2012, © Andrea Varela

I would like to conclude this report by quoting the 20th Century philosopher, Gilbert Simondon, who wrote: "The major cause of alienation in the modern world lies in the ignorance of the machine, which is not an alienation caused by the machine, if not by the disregard of its nature and essence, by its absence from the world of meanings, and its omission from the table of values and concepts that are part of the culture." [1]

In my view, in spite of the historical links between technology and weapons of surveillance and destruction, today this position depends on the ethics and aesthetics of the user. It seems natural that in the cycle of life, production should give way to reproduction, recreation and re-birth. A second life.

References

1. Gilbert Simondon, Du mode d'existence des objets techniques (Méot, 1958; second edition. Paris: Aubier, 1989), 31.

Bio

Andrea Varela is Director of *Proyecto AbRiGo* since 2006 and Professor of Electronic Arts at the Universidad Nacional de Tres de Febrero in Buenos Aires, Argentina. *Proyecto AbRiGo* provides workshops open to the community and develops research on the relationship between fabric and technology. The works produced have been exhibited in UNIART, a Design exhibition of national state universities; in ENLACES at the CCJL. Borges Design and Art Festival; and at UNTREF, La Toma Gallery in Santa Fe, Argentina. In 2000-2001, Andrea Valera was Visiting Scholar in the Hypermedia Studio at the University of California in Los Angeles.
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***Media*-N** was established in 2005 to provide a forum for New Media Caucus members, featuring their scholarly research, artworks and projects. **The New Media Caucus** is a nonprofit, international membership organization that advances the conceptual and artistic use of digital media. Additionally, the **NMC** is a College Art Association Affiliate Society. The mission of the electronic and print journals is to promote academic inquiry conducted by **NMC** members; to reflect the wide variety of themes and fields in new media research; to further the evolving discourses related to theory and practice; to showcase the work of new media artists and their presentation environments; and to investigate the issues surrounding education and new media. ***Media*-N**'s online & print versions differ in format but are similar in content. The publication is freely available online, and the print version may be purchased through a print-on-demand service. Each has a unique ISSN. ***Media*-N** is a peer reviewed and invitational journal. It is open to submissions in the form of theoretical papers, reports, and reviews on new media artworks

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