3x3x6 – 9 Sq.m. and 6 Surveillance Cameras

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Abstract

The title of Shu Lea Cheang's 3x3x6 which represented Taiwan at Venice Biennale 2019 derives from the 21st century high-security prison cell measured in 9 square meter and equipped with 6 surveillance cameras. As an immersive installation, 3x3x6 is comprised of multiple interfaces to reflect on the construction of sexual subjectivity by technologies of confinement and control, from physical incarceration to the omnipresent surveillance systems of contemporary society, from Jeremy Bentham's panopticon conceptualized in 1791 to China's Sharp Eyes that boasts 200 million surveillance cameras with facial recognition capacity for its 1.4 billion population. By employing strategic and technical interventions, 3x3x6 investigates 10 criminal cases in which the prisoners across time and space are incarcerated for sexual provocation and gender affirmation. The exhibition constructs collective counter-accounts of sexuality where trans punk fiction, queer, and anti-colonial imaginations hacks the operating system of the history of sexual subjection. This Image and Text piece intersperses images from the exhibition with handout texts written by curator Paul B. Preciado (against a grey background), as well as an interview between special section co-editor Paula Gardner and the artist that brings the extraordinary exhibition into further conversation with feminist technoscience scholarship. The project website is available at <https://3x3x6-v2.webflow.io/>.

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Keywords

incarceration, sexuality, gender, surveillance, exhibition, interview

Handout text (Preciado): Reflecting upon the transformation of surveillance techniques since the panopticon to include contemporary 3-D facial recognition, AI, and the Internet, 3x3x6 restages the rooms of the Palazzo delle Prigioni—a Venetian prison from the sixteenth century in operation until 1922—as a high-tech surveillance space. Taking as its starting point the story of libertine writer Giacomo Casanova, imprisoned in the Prigioni in 1755, the artist has conducted in-depth studies on ten historical and contemporary cases of subjects incarcerated because of gender or sexual dissent, including Marquis de Sade and Michel Foucault, as well as contemporary cases from countries including Taiwan, China and South Africa. Their fictionalized portraits become part of the exhibition's system; the title of which refers to today's standardized architecture of industrial imprisonment: a 3 x 3 square-meter cell constantly monitored by 6 cameras.

The artist departs from the architecture of the panopticon to construct the central space of the exhibition in Room A: the surveillance tower has been inverted to project the portraits of the ten prisoners and connected up to a facial recognition 3-D camera surveillance system, which installed at the entrance of the exhibition scans the visitors' faces—by electing to enter the exhibition they are accepting to become part of the system and to having their face modified. Here, gender and racial morphing become queer digital strategies to disrupt the tradition of colonial and anthropometric identification techniques, extending from Alphonse Bertillon's criminological photography of the nineteenth century to today's facial recognition technologies. Connected to the Internet 3x3x6 allows visitors (both physical and virtual) to send selfies and images to the exhibition system. The visitors are thus inside the total surveillance apparatus. Moving into Rooms B and C of the updated Prigioni, the physical visitors then wander into a maze of monitors that unfold the stories of the ten prisoners across time and space, histories and cultures. Whereas in the eighteenth century, Casanova's libertinage and Sade's atheist negation of morality were the object of surveillance and discipline, in contemporary techno-patriarchal digital conditions, the black man is constructed as "rapist," the HIV-positive homosexual, the transgender person and women are constructed as sexual e-hunters, while witches are the new subjects beyond the law. Finally, in Room D, visitors are invited to discover the control room and the very operating system of the surveillance apparatus in function.

Hacking digital surveillance technologies and social media, the artist uses the site of the prison to create a real-time dissident interface that the visitor is invited to join. Engaging legal documents, fake news, historical reports, myths and fantasies, and data retrieved from 3-D surveillance cameras and the images

uploaded by visitors, the intervention constructs a collective counter-history of sexuality—where trans-punk- science fiction, queer, and anti-colonial imaginations provide visual and critical frameworks to think through the histories of subjection and resistance—and activates a critical proliferation of poetic and political actions for digital times. A contribution to the digital avant-garde, the author's 3x3x6 equally challenges the aesthetics of Internet global capitalism and the gender, sexual, and race norms that hold up its hidden infrastructure.

Paula Gardner: Shu Lea, can you talk about the process by which you created this exhibition? The space given to you at the Biennale is the Palazzo delle Prigioni, which was the central prison of Venice from the Renaissance until 1922. It is renowned for being the site of incarceration of Italian writer and mythical lover Giacomo Casanova who was detained there in 1755 for months before escaping. In 3x3x6 you respond to the building's history, materially and conceptually, for the exhibition. Curator Paul B. Preciado comments that your immersive installation with multiple interfaces invests the building "in the crossings of histories and fictions, memory and imagination" to reflect "on the construction of sexual subjectivity by technologies of confinement and control, from physical incarceration to the omnipresent surveillance systems of contemporary society."

Figure 1. A projection tower is installed in Gallery A that includes 10 cases with 10 projectors and 10 screens. On each case a one-minute introduction of the incarcerated across time and space is projected.

Figure 2. Gallery B and C feature 10 4K monitors that are placed on the floor and show 10 films of 10 minute each. Each film is a case study of the incarcerated. A beam of light slowly moves across the room from one end to the other and back.

Shu Lea Cheang: In conceiving the installation that occupies the old prison site, I took on several strategic approaches – from hardware wiring to software hack, from codes to data, from scripting to casting, to determine how to sketch a collective scheme of revolt from within (the system).

The Palazzo delle Prigioni has been the venue for Taiwan in Venice presentation organized by the Taipei Fine Arts Museum since 1995. When I was chosen to represent Taiwan for Venice Biennale 2019 and informed of a solo exhibition to use this former prison palace, I did the research to find the connection with Giacomo Casanova. From all records, Casanova was accused with an undetermined charge, likely a combination of corruption, indecency, and public outrage. The case of Casanova guides further research to locate historical and contemporary cases in which the prisoners across time and space are incarcerated for sexual provocation and gender affirmation.

Figure 3. Casanova X *floating* inside the 16th century prison cell is geolocated and tracked by facial recognition software.

Figure 4. The incarcerated identified by facial recognition software as they walk across various landscapes.

My initial decision about the installation is to keep the site intact, not to impose any additional walls for the exhibition's sake. I remade the connection with panopticon interface in my Guggenheim Museum project BRANDON (1998-1999) in which a close circuited panopticon interface (based on Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon Principle 1787) houses cases of sexual deviants and prison inmates, serving both as hospital wards (6) and prison cells (6), both as transient station and surveillance apparatus. Yet I was also quick to realize the current data tracking facial recognition surveillance apparatus has turned the larger society into a digital panopticon without four walls. The issue became how to divert the omnipresent surveillance systems-- how to subvert the technologies of confinement and control, and, finally, to construct collective counter-accounts of sexuality where trans punk fiction, queer, and anti-colonial imaginations hacks the operating system of the history of sexual subjection.

Figure 5. Gallery D displays a 30° leaning standing cube as the centerpiece of the tiny gallery space. The transparent cube (1.8m x 1.2m) consists of 5 transparent acrylic plates, each 128cm x 128cm. The cube houses all system hardware: monitors, wifi routers, sound card & sound mixer that operate the exhibition.

Figure 6. View from gallery A's projection screens, the transparent cube in the gallery D displays the controlling mechanism. The incarcerated shown on the projection screens undergo facial recognition tracking. The tracked images are morphed and collapsed into pixelated bytes.

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Figure 7. Surveillance cameras capable of 3D image capture are set up at the staircase. The visitors upon ascending the staircase leading to the 2nd floor galleries are informed of the surveillance cameras' presence.

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Figure 8. The monitor shows images captured by the 3D surveillance cameras. The captured images of the visitors are further processed by hacked facial recognition software and manipulated to an "un- recognizable' state before transmitting to the gallery A's projection.

Figure 9. The 3D surveillance camera capture processed and the dance video sent through the 3x3x6 app manipulated intervene the projection that identifies the 10 incarcerated.

Prisons as sites of resistance

Turning the 16 century Palazzo delle Prigioni into a multiplex immersive installation.

The prison therefore functions ideologically as an abstract site into which undesirables are deposited, relieving us of the responsibility of thinking about the real issues afflicting those communities from which prisoners are drawn in such disproportionate numbers. This is the ideological work that the prison performs - it relieves us of the responsibility of seriously engaging with the problems of our society, especially those produced by racism and increasingly, global capitalism.

– Angela Davis “Are prisons Obsolete?” (2003)

Handout text (Preciado): The inverted Panopticon– the all-seeing eyes of surveillance apparatus is subverted, replaced by an electronic programmed projection tower that is equipped with 10 projectors beaming portraits of defiance.

Gardner: Can you talk about how the space inspired this work and how you engaged with the material and conceptual history of the space? Also, can you discuss The Inverted Panopticon and transparent systems control, and The Leaning (30 degree), a transparent cube that houses the installation’s control system? I understand that these controlled the projections and also were presented as art pieces themselves?

Cheang: Set up in 4 gallery spaces (A,B,C,D), the Palazzo delle Prigioni is now regularly used as a cultural space while centuries old stone walls remain. My initial design concept is to allow the 4 gallery spaces to “communicate” with each other. Thus, the set up: [gallery A] – an inverted control tower with 10 projectors, instead of all-seeing eyes surveillance, the projection introduces the 10 characters of the 10 “criminal” cases: [gallery B+C]. Ten 4K monitors are set up, placed directly on the floor, each monitor “confines” one incarcerated character, and each is presented by a 10 minute film. [gallery D] – the system control mechanism is “exhibited” (exposed) in a transparent cube (1.8mx1.2m) of 30 degree leaning. Additionally, there are two surveillance 3D cameras set up along the staircases coming up to the gallery, and an app that invites people to send in dance videos (in solidarity with the Iranian girl, Maedeh Hojabri, who was jailed for posting a dance video on Instagram). Both the surveillance camera capturing visitors and the dance videos submitted were further manipulated and programmed at intervals to “intervene” in the projecting loops in the gallery A. The installation is operated with WIFI network system control to connect all spaces.

Figure 10. Panopticon interface in BRANDON (1998-1999). Based on Jeremy Bentham's all surveillance prison system Panopticon, a central tower is raised to watch over the cells.

Figure 11. 12 cells are made for the Panopticon interface. Six (in red) are hospital wards. the other six (in blue) are prison cells, each incarcerates tales of sexual deviants.

Gardner: Also, can you talk about the audience experience of the space—how they are allowed or not allowed to navigate and move through the exhibition?

Cheang: The visitors to the gallery space upon entering are greeted with a disclaimer written in several languages: "By entering this exhibition 3x3x6, you agree and consent to enter a surveillance system set up by the artist. In accordance with the EU General Data Protection Regulation, your 3D scanned image data is held locally within a closed network and further processed as part of the exhibition display." Entering gallery A, the visitors can walk in between projection screens while seeing their own surveillance camera captured images being tracked and cutting into the prisoners' portraits. The room is powered by a pitched and sub-ed noise of surveillance rendered musically by sound artist Jasmine Guffond. The visitors submit themselves to a projected roaming landscape of defiance. This gallery A introduction leads to the gallery B+C's 10 monitors, all on view as one enters the space. One can choose the monitor/prisoner she wants to stay with. The films scripted with Paul B. Preciado take historical facts of the "offenders" on a whimsical spin. By exiting the cells/monitors, one enters gallery D's leaning cubes which display the source of surveillance camera captures, as image processing. By calling this mixed media installation immersive, we reject the notion of programmed "interactivity" while we invite "intervention."

Figure 12. Initial hand drawing, sketch of the 360 degree turning panopticon tower or the gallery A at Palazzo Delle Prigioni.

Gardner: Paul B. Preciado, curator for 3x3x6, and someone with whom you have worked for a long time, writes that the exhibition creates “a ‘panopticon’ surveillance space, employing a unique ‘trans punk’ narrative and a specific method of audience intervention,” that “invites the viewer to imagine a new vocabulary and means of liberation.” Can you discuss how you see your work as crossing panoptic surveillance and trans punk? In what ways does that conjuncture invite audience intervention? What kind of liberation is possible in this audience experience?

Cheang: We call it “inverted” panopticon. Instead of the all-seeing eye on a central tower, the projection tower beams images that show defiance of the 10 incarcerated walking forward, faces captured by the surveillance camera at the staircase and the uploaded dance movement; both are manipulated, becoming unrecognizable and cutting into the loops of the 10 characters. The audience invited to “participate” are informed of the plots. They become the active players in an “intervention” scenario.

Figure 13. The sketch-up view of the installation in 4 gallery space with an immersive narrative that takes the viewers through gallery A to B+C to D.

Figure 14. The exhibition is operated with networked protocols. 3 wifi routers are set up to connect the gallery spaces. The software programming manages all running systems, including the timing and the intervals of the 10 projection, the synchronization of 10 monitors, the intervention of the facial recognition image capture of the visitors and the dance video submitted worldwide through a 3x3x6 app

Figure 15. Sketch up 3D design of the transparent cube. The 30 degree leaning of the cube signals system crumpling. The difficult parts of the design include making the air circulating inside the cube, so as not to overheat the equipments and making sure the cube is stable with the leaning.

Figure 16. 3D sketch for the inverted panopticon. 10 projectors beaming images of defiance replace the all surveillance eye of the watching guardian on top of the tower. The rings with projectors mounted are programmed to turn 180 degree back and forth, allowing intervention and pauses

We use the term “trans punk fiction” to describe the filmic tactics. Reclaiming “punk” like re-owning the derogatory calling of negro or queer. The scripts for the 10 cases, including Casanova, Marquis de Sade, Michel Foucault, while based on research and historical facts, are made up with fantasia imagination that crosses gender, genre, time and space. For example, Casanova was played by a Euro-Asian performer Enrico Wey, Sade was portrayed by a large woman Liz Rosenfeld and Foucault by a young rising French punk actor, Félix Maritaud. There are cello crossing encounters – i.e., Foucault sits with RX in his/her cell to address views on queerness in Islamic culture; Sade meets MWX to chase the numbers. We invite the audience to free associate the narratives. We do not debate guilt or remorse, neither offer any defense for any of them. At the end, we do not prescribe a “story” to be experienced, but rely on audience’s own imagination to fill in the gaps of the narratives.

I fuck up my facial tracking

Handout text (Preciado): Appropriating the surveillance mechanism of a controlled society, the installation exposes the apparatus of controlling systems, codes rewritten, data reclaimed.

Gardner: In your work that hacks recognition systems, you play with identities that are captured and confined/controlled, pointing to surveillance and criminality system norms around the world. I use the word play here instructively—we sense glee and abandon in this work. Can you talk about the pieces I fuck up my face tracking and I buy myself an Avatar selfie on the internet in regard to this playful reflection on face tracking and body modification?

Cheang: There are 3D model markets on the net where you can purchase ready-made 3D models for further rendering. For 3x3x6, I want to make myself an avatar that doesn’t have to be a “ME”. I bought models/.obj of my desired race/gender and made a combined self – i.e., thick lips, blue eyes, a fat ass. In constructing a recombinant avatar to divert facial recognition tracking, I bought myself some .obj on the internet. This avatar of recombined data defies surveillance tracking. The 3D avatar created thus is my current day self-portrait, a purchased identity that facial recognition tracking software fails to connect the dots.

Gardner: This special section is also seeking to collide global and disciplinary conversations around systems, their practices of opacity, ability to reify categories and restrain how and what knowledge is produced and made normal, and to imagine and render visible transgressions. Critical and cultural approaches and feminist approaches provide “situated knowledges” (e.g., Donna Haraway, Karen Barad) as a conceptual frame to understand systems as contingent in complicated ways on network and other pressures that continually (re) situate them, causing

them to continually “become.” Do the systems you are pressuring in 3x3x6 reflect this kind of idea—that practices of surveillance, incarceration, sexual “deviance” emerge symbiotically but also diverge in unique formations due to contexts (such as territory)? Does that kind of idea resonate in your work and how so?

“Collapsing the avatar self – The incarcerated undergoing facial recognition tracking morphs into transgenic avatar and diminishes into pixel bits.”

I want this shaved head

<https://www.turbosquid.com/3d-models/beauty-female-head-obj/1087260>

Beauty female head

\$70 \$55

I want this thick mouth

<https://www.cgtrader.com/3d-models/character/woman/average-black-female-head-basemesh>

Average Black Female Head Basemesh 3D model

\$59.00 -30% = \$41.30

I want this torso

<https://www.cgtrader.com/3d-models/character/woman/hi-res-female-body-model>

Hi res Female body model 3D model

\$ 14

Figure 17. Various assets, thick lips, a large torso and blue eyes, that the artist bought on the Internet to construct a recombinant avatar of the artist.

Figure 18. Blurred outline of head and shoulders of a person wearing a pink shirt. White lines connected by dots are placed over the blurred head to further divert facial recognition tracking.

Cheang: Fundamentally I aim at subverting the operating structures and the system control mechanism. In my installation work, I re-create a “structure,” a “system,” and invite audiences to “intervene.” Closed circuit as it is, the construct of a microcosm serves as a re-enactment, a reflection of a larger society. The audience upon entering the Prigioni space is complicit in an artist’s scheme of “subversion.” Their faces captured by 3D surveillance cameras set up at the staircases are transmitted to gallery D’s operating system and further processed and manipulated before re-transmitted onto the gallery A’s projection screens, intervening in the incarcerated’s criminal records. The “exposé” of the system control mechanism of the leaning transparent cube permits the audience’s participation of an intervening scheme conjured up by the artist.

Trans-Punk-Fiction

The Algorithm of Gender & Sexuality in the Digital Age

Handout text (Preciado): In the gallery B+C, 10 monitors show 10 cases, 10 films, 10 minutes each. Scripted as a case study, each case serves the purpose to examine the impact of technologies on the production and control of gendered, sexualized, and racialized subjects. The 10 scripts, written in collaboration with Paul B. Preciado, while based on research of archive materials and court case documents, follow free flow narratives that allow the prisoners to travel through time and space. The casting defies racial and gender conformity in its selection of performers, i.e., Casanova X is played by Enrico Wey of Asian descent and Sade X by Liz Rosenfeld, a cis woman.

Figure 19. Foucault X meets R X in R X' 3x3x6 prison cell where they discuss homosexuality and cultural difference.

Gardner: The “10 cases” film piece aligns 10 subjects deemed sexually and/or gender deviant with famous “deviants”—theorist Michel Foucault, romantic legend Casanova, and the Marquis de Sade, plus individuals identified only by letters and numbers such as DX and ooX . Can you talk about how and why your “algorithm” reimagines these subjects as transcending gender and breaking time and space barriers? I’m sensing this as a joyful rejection of the algorithm; are you suggesting that we humans ourselves are only algorithmic interfaces (that might be reputable, just)?

Cheang: For the three historical characters in the films, Casanova, Marquis de Sade, Foucault, we can keep the real names. For the other 7 contemporary cases, we decided not to reveal real names. All 10 characters’ names are added with an

X, considering each individual, each case is not alone. I.e., DX takes up cases of rape by deception, deception in concealing true physical gender, that include Hen Alkobi of Israel, Jennifer Saunders of UK, Sean O'Neill, Christopher Wheatley of USA, the legend of white snake in China and the case of Raymundo in Mexico. ooX refers to a teacher in Taiwan who was arrested for soliciting gay men to have chemsex via social networks and sentenced to twelve years in prison for knowingly spreading the HIV virus and endangering others. oo actually were the symbols used in his court document to conceal his real name. o also refers to a gay man who is of "bottom" position. To get into the algorithm of gender and sexuality in the digital age is to sift through the data vault of the control system. For the 10 films in 3x3x6, the fictionalized, combined, disjointed narratives and the exorbitant imagery across time and space bring the 10 incarcerated together to jointly defy the pre-set algorithm of race and gender processing in the digital age.

Handout text (Preciado): ... computational structures start to work their way into the veins of culture more broadly. Meanwhile, amidst this state of doubling, recursivity, and transformation, we can recognize the condition of heterogeneity as a fundamental aspect of the present. This is not an absolute and incoherent heterogeneity but one within which we have to find the as yet unuttered urgencies and exigencies, Matthew Fuller, "Inhabiting High-Density Realities: On Shu Lea Cheang's Artistic Language", 2019, in the 3x3x6 catalogue

Figure 20. B X meets Foucault X in a kitchen modelled after the kitchen in *Jeanne Dielman, 23, quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (Chantal Akerman, 1975). B X is accused of cutting off her husband's penis and throwing it into a garbage disposal. B X makes a penis cake and serves it to Foucault X who preaches on crime of passion.

Figure 21. SADE X chases MW X who discharges shits of electronic components. SADE X counts the numbers as the electronic parts float in the mid-air.

Gardner: Can you reflect back on this work—what critiques or juxtapositions are more important to you now that you’ve mounted the exhibition? Does the pandemic cause you to think differently about the 3x3x6 exhibition?

Cheang: 3x3x6 remains to be a milestone work for me, for having the possibility to exercise a “complete” concept in Palazzo delle Prigioni, for working with Paul B. Preciado closely and intensely for a year, for having the exhibition in the context of Venice Biennale where sex and gender are yet to be fully explored.

3x3x6, in its reference to the high security prison cells, is contagious. Cell units can be multiplied, but the “crime” can’t be contained within. The surveillance apparatus that checks into a person’s living quarter is agent of viral transmission. Year 2020, as I wrapped up 3x3x6 with the shipment of its hardware home and the pause of my lecture tours, the pandemic arrives. On April 3, 2020, Arundhati Roy published in Financial Times “The Pandemic is a portal,” reporting on India’s viral conditions. A year later, the rich, the poor, rerouted to sort out vaccine politics - the patent war, the vaccine distribution. We have not arrived at the gateway between one world and the next - you and I don’t live in the same viral reality. Amidst the lockdown in Paris, I returned to work on my feature film, UKI. Conceived in 2009 as I launched “Viral Love BioHack” as a new cycle of my work, UKI is now being developed as a sci-fi viral alt-reality cinema. Virus as dissidence, virus mutated within, virus becoming.

Handout text:

you free?
I am 0, you are 1.
You are 1. I am 0.

*You come? I go?
Inside you?
Outside me?*

- 0011, lyrics (excerpts) for 00X pill dancing, Shu Lea Cheang 2019

Author Bio

Shu Lea Cheang is an artist, filmmaker, networker working with various art mediums and film formats, including installation, performance, net art, public art, video installation, feature-length film and mobile web serial. As a net art pioneer, her project [BRANDON](#) (1998-1999) was the first web art commissioned and collected by the Guggenheim Museum in New York. She drafts sci-fi narratives in her film scenario and artwork imagination, crafting her own “science” fiction genre of new queer cinema. From homesteading cyberspace in the 90s to her current retreat to post net-crash BioNet zone, Cheang takes on viral love, bio hack in her current cycle of works. In 2019, she represented Taiwan with a solo exhibition 3x3x6 at Venice Biennale.

Paula Gardner is Associate Professor and Asper Chair at McMaster University, Ontario. She runs Pulse Lab at McMaster, which engages collaborative practice to innovate art and health technologies with community for social change.

Stephen Surlin is a Ph.D. student Communication, New Media, and Cultural Studies program at McMaster University. His work focuses on creating archives using new media and the digital networking infrastructure needed to sustain them.