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TIME IS A FLAT CIRCLE

A conversation between Hayley Silverman and Damon Zucconi

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HS: So I think it's interesting that we are both atheists, inspired to make work surrounding the spiritual. Atheism and spirituality aren't diametrically opposed but I have been thinking about what it means to be a non-believer philosophically interested in belief- - I'm guessing it has a lot to do with our backgrounds (you in Catholic school, and me in Hebrew school). For this show I've been reading about recording angels, which in Islamic, Judaic, and Christian angelology, are assigned by God with the duty of recording every person's "good deeds" and "bad deeds" which basically means all actions/events that transpire over the course of your life. More specifically, I have been thinking about how angels follow the experiences of your life and note them in a book.

DZ: Yeah, one of the aspects of Catholicism that's been very difficult to escape, is that sense of being observed, unceasingly. I like that about the angels—recording them in books, always, everywhere... like just existence itself is an act of publishing.

HS: That's really interesting. Text itself mediates a relationship with God, as God manifests through text but is also at the same time unknowable and beyond representation. It makes me think about the space between language and meaning:

"Meaning wanders, like human tribulation, or like error, from text to text, and within a text, from figure to figure. What governs this wandering, this errancy, is defense, a beautiful necessity of defense. For not just interpretation is defense, but meaning itself is defense, and so meaning wanders to protect itself. In its etymology, "defense" refers to "things forbidden" and to "prohibition" and we can speculate that poetic defense rises in close alliance with the notions of trespass and transgression, crucial for self-presentation of any new strong poetic. (Kabbalah and Criticism, Harold Bloom (82))

This quote is specific to Kabbalah's formation through the exile of Jews in Spain, but I like thinking about it alongside the idea of "existence itself as an act of publishing". Fear of exile helped create this form of literary representation. I am still caught up on why angels keep a cumulative record in the form of a book* (which varies from each religion in name) for themselves.

DZ: There's a moral dimension to this—a written account is available to multiple readings. If the entirety of existence is text, then what of the secrets that lie latent in any document. Is there an "angelic hermeneutics," where re-readings of our world create new parallel ones? That's something you seem to be involved with as well, with your work rewriting and restaging plays using dogs as performers. Your position there is angelic in a similar sense, the dogs ignorant of their real roles in your world.

HS: I love being called an angel, thank you! This all makes me think about human error, since reading always leads to other readings and inevitably mis-readings. There are two things at play here (and probably a million more), one being that reading re-writes the original. The text being read inevitably opens up a parallel new world and with it an embedded signature-- your interpretation. I wonder if text can exist outside of the paradox of being read. Which seems to unleash a quagmire on the philosophy of hermeneutics itself. But I like thinking about this idea where, "Whenever two discuss the Law their words are recorded above" (Ber. 6a)" by angels and the age of #altfacts in one stream of consciousness. Call-out culture in biblical times was crucifixion for being a heretic. Maybe the bible could only be written in a time without google, wikipedia, and network culture. The tools that share knowledge have created such different scales of discovery and punishment. "Change the instruments, and you will change the entire social theory that goes with them," Latour, 2009

1 "a book of remembrance" — "In His infinite knowledge, God does not need a written record in order to keep track of human deeds. However, when He speaks to us, He often uses metaphor or parable to help us understand (Mark 4:33). As Malachi presented God's words to the people, they would have understood what a book of remembrance represented. The kings of Persia kept such books, records of those who had rendered service to the king, that those servants might be rewarded. The book of Esther contains a good example of this (Esther 6:1-3)."

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DZ: Have you heard of Laplace's demon?

HS: Nope!

DZ: "In the history of science, Laplace's demon was the first published articulation of causal or scientific determinism by Pierre-Simon Laplace in 1814. According to determinism, if someone (the Demon) knows the precise location and momentum of every atom in the universe, their past and future values for any given time are entailed; they can be calculated from the laws of classical mechanics."

What I like about this is that the angels and the demon hold the same position. Knowing the absolute state of the world means that you can write the future.

With Spiritual Door, I had set up a system to capture and archive people's orientations from their mobile phones. I wound up aggregating this archive of hundreds of thousands of compass headings. Something I noticed, looking through the data, is that you'd see someone browsing a website for a while in the morning, facing one direction, then all of a sudden their orientation would flip 180 degrees. What I think I see is someone lying awake in bed, and then rolling over, switching sides. All of a sudden this sober recitation of facts became very personal and intimate.



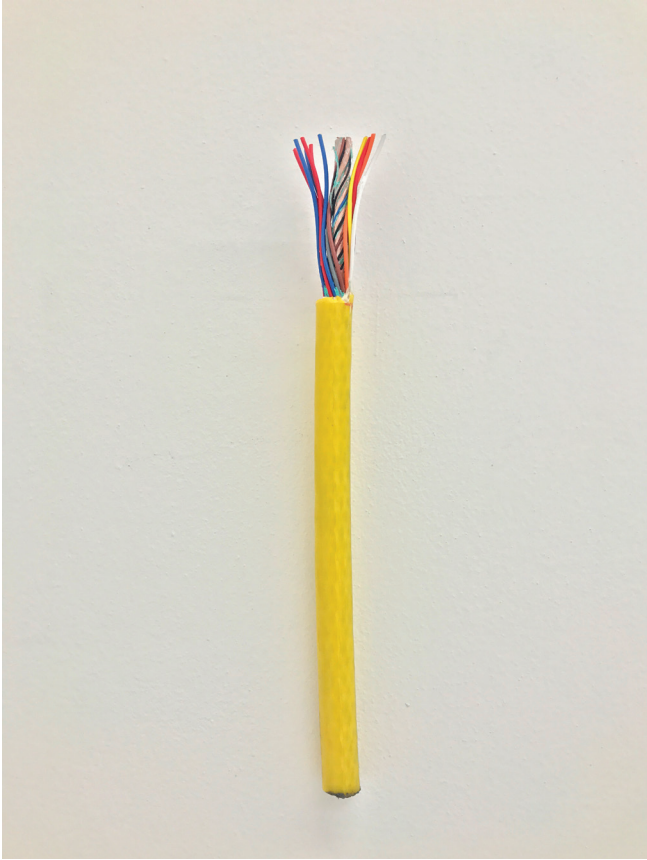
This story, of turning over in bed, is just an interpretation I'm imposing, but it's effortless to overlay readings like this. You can find any narrative you want if you have enough data. This age of alternative facts feels like a function of the amount of information we collect, which makes sense if looked at as just another step in the history of representation.

An angelic hermeneutics writes the future because the future is computable. The obvious question becomes: what kind of entity does this make Google or Facebook or the NSA or...?

Peter Thiel named his big data analysis start-up after the "seeing stone" in Tolkien's *legendarium*. *Palantír*, literally meaning "Farsighted" or "One that Sees from Afar."

HS: I'm sure we could ask some elders how they mythologize Google. I loved hearing my ninety year old grandmother explain what she thinks "the cloud" is in which she describes a place people can congregate and share whatever is on their mind without having to leave the house. This makes me think about science fiction and how everything that is happening in regards to corporate oligarchies and data collection has already been written in the 80's and onward. I wish I could remember what happens at the end of Stross's book *Accelerando*.

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DZ: It ends with the protagonists having become refugees from the Singularity... which is appropriate. I want to ask about this bouquet of cables, which feels prescient, but I'm not sure how to make the leap from here to there? It reminds me of those images of deep sea data cables which have been cut.

HS: It is those deep sea data cables! I wrote to a company that manufactures electro-optical-mechanical cables and was able to get a sample of the ones that carry the internet under the sea. I thought it was important in thinking about satellites of communication, that we see what they physically look like. My "Cable Bouquet" is a simple offering of something hidden that acts with God-like omnipresence. On the flip side, I'm like.. how did a non-bodied genderless messenger of God end up being drawn as a man with wings. I mean, I get it...maybe this circles back to the quote you mentioned by Kevin Kelly, "Vanity trumps privacy". No matter what people will scan their faces and fingers in order to see themselves as a cat on Snapchat.

Cable Bouquet, marine optic cables, 2017



St Paul to the Corinthians: "per speculum in aenigmate"—In an enigma by means of a mirror—we only see God now as a reflection. (1 Corinthians 13:12)

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Technology is a mirror, is this what you're getting at with the title "The Living Watch Over the Living"?

HS:The title came to me when making the image that shares the show's title.

Pictured within it is a silhouetted figure gazing toward the viewer. They are standing between an open door and an image that hangs on the wall of Sputnik, the first artificial Earth satellite launched by the Soviet Union. The figure lights a stick of incense that's reflected in deep space surrounding Sputnik. The title makes me think about the multiplicities of being watched.

DZ: I'm also thinking of this sculpture you showed me—where the mirror intercepts an angel's view of its "book of remembrance." It gives the agency back to the viewer—now you're the one that gets to re-read your existence. Is that what living watching over the living is, taking back our power from the heavens and giving it to one another?

HS: Haha, this just made me think about this whole text being some encoded ad for Hakim Bey's book T.A.Z.

DZ: So, what about surveillance, though? What to do with those multiplicities of being watched? Lately, something I've been wondering about is if it's possible to recast the loss of privacy as a productive force? Even now, as I'm typing this in our shared Google Document, I can see your avatar and cursor, hovering in the paragraph above this one. I don't really know if you're watching... are you?

HS: LOL. I 'checked in' but wasn't...watching. I guess when thinking about these two scales of surveillance- both the Angelic and Big data - - there's nothing to do necessarily. Being weary, being scared, being given tons of hail mary's: these are some of the effects of their power. Your lifestyle is an outcome of how much you believe in them to some extent. What do you think of when you mention losing privacy as a 'productive force'? Immediately I think of Edward Snowden and other whistleblowers exposing mass surveillance.

DZ: I don't know, the obvious response to these trends is that they are all *very bad things*... but these aren't forces that are stoppable so, what are some upsides? For example, is it possible for a loss of privacy to create some mutant form of collectivity?

Kevin Kelly has spoken about this at length: "The remedy for over-secrecy is to think in terms of coveillance, so that we make tracking and monitoring as symmetrical — and transparent — as possible. [...] with transparent coveillance where everyone sees each other — a sense of entitlement can emerge: Every person has a human right to access, and benefit from, the data about themselves."

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<https://www.arenanet.com/damon-zucconi/nude-figures-as-seen-from-space>

DZ: By authoring this document together, we're making use of co-veiling technologies. Those indications of the other's presence, watching, creates a situation where we're holding one another accountable.

HS: I'm happy google docs can be a co-veilant success. The idea that "... every person has a human right to access, and benefit from, the data about themselves." definitely lives in an alternative universe without Peter Thiel and this extreme age of billionaires having the social capital and political influence to censor journalism.... I like that when we started we were questioning the idea of text living in a space without reading and here we are thinking about Free Speech. They both share this concept of unadulterated expression which is tricky since nothing is without influence (or maybe that's the question...?)....Speaking of which I just googled the phrase, "does God know the future" and found the most popular follow up was, "and still give us free will." The public wants to know!!!

DZ: "Those primed to hold a deterministic view by reading statements like 'Science has demonstrated that free will is an illusion' were less likely to give money to a homeless person or lend someone a cellphone. [They were] less creative, more likely to conform, less willing to learn from their mistakes, and less grateful toward one another." (There's No Such Thing as Free Will, The Atlantic, June 2016)

Maybe they want to know, and maybe the future is written... but it's still a secret. Some secrets are information that's in the world, but inaccessible. We've just been "given" free will in the form of our ignorance.

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A Rose, Dr. Dáin L., Tasker, 1936.