

**PhD Thesis**

**PROJECT NEUROCAM:  
AN INVESTIGATION**

**Robin Hely**

**Department of Multimedia and Digital Art,  
Faculty of Art, Architecture and Design  
Monash University**

**November 2012**

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## Abstract

For my PhD I have produced a film and a ficto-critical thesis that explores the issue of audience interaction as a primary determinant in the making of an artwork. The focus of the research is "Project Neurocam", an earlier on-line interactive project made by myself.

The main objective of the research is to examine the theoretical questions generated by this project—is it art? Where does authorship reside? Is it a hoax? What kinds of relationships does it construct? These questions are addressed in the research outcomes of the PhD project, which are in the form of a 75-minute narrative film and a ficto-critical thesis, written as an investigative narrative inquiry into how these considerations relate to the audience's perception of the work.

Whilst the original Project Neurocam was designed by myself, these two new projects constitute new creative outputs exploring the meaning of an interactive project from the viewpoint of the participant, and exploring this perspective through narrative-structured forms so that the works engage new audiences via story telling. The new work represents a clear shift of focus for myself into theoretical examinations of the role of the audience and a move into different narrative media. Added to these two, new original works, is an extended exegesis that casts the fictional works and their theoretical implications in conventional academic terms. The three components represent the outcomes of this PhD research.

To locate my research within the field of creative practice and theory, my thesis focuses primarily on the following related areas:

1. Interactive performance artworks where direct interaction with an audience is integral to the creation of the work.
2. The role of the hoax: comparisons between Crop Circles and Neurocam.
3. Nicolas Bourriaud's Relational Aesthetics: is Neurocam an example of Relational Art?

4. Flash Mobs and Smart Mobs: the use of new communication technologies to create self-perpetuating social structures.
5. The social implications of Alternate Reality Games (ARGs) and their similarities and differences to Project Neurocam.

My thesis is written using an experimental writing style called Fictocriticism, which merges the traditional divisions between fiction, theory and criticism into a single text. This text tells a story while making an argument.

In this case the story will be the story of Project Neurocam, from the point of view of an anonymous main protagonist. The narrative will explore the many complexities of the project from the point of view of the audience, and will be based on interviews, conversations, blogs, message boards, forums, chat rooms and writing from actual participants. The narrative will also incorporate all of the theoretical references and discourse, which will contextualise the project within the broader framework of contemporary fine art practice.

The practical component of my studio-based PhD is a feature length film I have written, produced and directed that allows the viewer to experience what it would be like to participate directly in Project Neurocam. The film follows an investigative journalist's journey as he attempts to infiltrate and expose what Project Neurocam is, who is behind it and what their agenda is.

The film is different to the thesis in that it focuses on the experiential aspects of the project rather than the theoretical connections. As well as giving the viewer a visual representation of the project's unique aesthetic, it also gives insight into the main protagonist's emotional connection with the content as he becomes increasingly more implicated in a series of strange scenarios dictated by what he sees as Project Neurocam's 'puppet masters'.

**Statement**

This thesis, except with the Research Graduate School Committee's approval, contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other institution and affirms that to the best of the candidate's knowledge the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference is made in the text of the thesis.

Signed:

Date:

## Extended Exegesis

### Project Neurocam: A New Model for Participatory Art Practice

#### Introduction

For my PhD I have produced a feature film entitled *WTF is Neurocam* that explores the issue of audience participation as a primary determinant in the making of an artwork. The film focuses on *Project Neurocam*, an ongoing interactive artwork that I initiated during 2004, which engages audiences in a series of secret ‘assignments’. Whilst the project began prior to my candidature, the main objective of this new body of research is to examine the theoretical implications and questions generated by the project – how is it contextualised within fine art discourse, where does authorship reside, is it a hoax and what kinds of socio-cultural relationships does it construct? These questions are addressed in the writing and the practical research outcomes of the PhD project, which is an 82-minute narrative film, scripted as an investigative narrative inquiry into how these considerations relate to the way a work is perceived and experienced by an audience.

*Project Neurocam* is loosely based on the idea of unwitting audience participation as explored by John Fowles’ 1966 novel, *The Magus*, in which the main protagonist’s entire reality is gradually subverted by what is presumed to be an elaborate work of theatre, in which the relationship between director and audience is redefined and the world itself becomes the stage. This key idea can be traced back to G.K. Chesterton’s 1905 novel *Club of Queer Trades*, in which an organization known as the *Adventure and Romance Society* set about perpetrating complex theatrical fabrications in order to give individuals a series of unexpected life-changing experiences. *Project Neurocam* similarly attempts to mask its content, context and objectives in an attempt to construct spontaneous, evolving narratives where the participants are a key component of the work itself and the role of the artist is continually being redefined by the involvement of the audience.

To stage *Project Neurocam* without revealing anything that would contextualise or define the project in any way to an audience, it was important to conceal its authorship and intentions. The project's creation and execution had to be done entirely in secret and all communication with the audience carried out anonymously using IP cloaking with emails, fake names and masks for all street-level interactions. While maintaining this high level of secrecy, it was also important for the project's success to engage a large audience, which meant promoting it and advertising for participants to engage with the content. This promotional strategy was highly problematic as it raised the question: how do we promote something without revealing what it is? Teaser campaigns on television, billboards and the Internet have often dealt with the device of concealing the product or service being offered and creating a high level of intrigue by offering up deliberately obscure or misleading information. *Project Neurocam* employed a similar strategy by utilising a supersite billboard which featured only the slogan "get out of your mind" and a website address. The website offered a long list of all the things Neurocam was *not* and an opportunity to sign up. The intention was to engage the audience purely out of curiosity.

While the billboard and website had only limited success, the project's marketing strategy also involved engaging the media. Anonymous phone calls were made to radio stations, TV networks and newspapers, asking what Neurocam was and who was behind it. Eventually *The Age* took an interest in Neurocam and after some investigative journalism, the newspaper featured a front-page article on the project that further perpetuated its enigmatic nature. *Age* reporter Mark Moncrief unsuccessfully attempted to reveal the truth behind Neurocam, drawing from an interview with a Neurocam participant:

It began with a billboard, then an innocent exploration through cyberspace. Soon Graham Henstock found himself on secret assignment, the agent of a shadowy organisation.<sup>1</sup>

Moncrief summarised his position by stating:

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<sup>1</sup> Moncrief, Mark. "Entering Shadowy World of Neurocam." *The Age*, 18 December 2004.



Whether the whole thing is hoax, mind game, artistic experiment, sinister front or clever marketing ploy remains unclear.<sup>2</sup>

With an average readership of over 350,000 people, Neurocam went from engaging about 10 participants per week to thousands. The article also caught the attention of international online news hub *Metafilter*, who also posted an article about Neurocam, sparking worldwide interest. To date the project has now engaged over one million participants worldwide.

The intention with the project was to deliberately obscure its context and authorship in order to explore a new type of audience participation; one in which the audience were not given a framework to position or contextualise the work. Audience participation has seen many incarnations within art history from the early Fluxus Happenings to a long tradition of Performance Art and more recently *Live Art*. While many artists have explored immersive experiences and the idea of disrupting distinctions between spectator, participant and artist, these works have all been firmly positioned within designated art spaces and clearly labelled as art. By removing these frameworks the audience is *not aware* that they are having an art experience, potentially embracing the Dadaist desire of art and life becoming inextricably entwined. This lies at the core of the research: what are the social, cultural and art historical implications when creating contemporary artworks that exist outside an art context with no predefined parameters for engagement? It is also important to note that *Project Neurocam* is not intended as any kind of attack on art or society – it is an exploration of the intentionality, execution and contextualising of immersive participatory work, with a view to proposing a new model for audience engagement.

The film is a way of teasing out these themes in more detail as it is about the first hand experience of participating in *Project Neurocam*. The film uses the documentary format, beginning with quotes from *The Age* article, to explore *Project Neurocam* from the point of view of the participants. A documentary filmmaker attempts to infiltrate Neurocam, show the audience what it is like to participate and ultimately reveal who or what is behind it. Although the

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid

film uses a documentary format, it is clearly not what we would consider a typical documentary, if we were to define documentaries as films that accurately capture and represent reality. The 'documentary filmmaker' is a character played by an actor and most of the events are staged. It is also not a 'docu-drama' as although it is based on the historical events surrounding the staging of Project Neurocam, it is not presented as a dramatised re-enactment of these actual historical events. So how do we classify this type of film? To explore the issues surrounding the film's construction and methodology, we must further interrogate the notion of documentary itself.

Documentary has long held a privileged position within moving image formats because of its claim to be able to accurately capture and represent reality. According to Trinh Minh-Ha, documentary initially came about as a need to inform the people on issues often hidden or obscured. Subsequently it has taken on significance as a reaction against the entertainment industry's monopoly on the uses of film. Throughout much of the genre's early history, there has been a tradition of accepting the recorded document as an objective and unquestionable view of the world. As technological advances in the medium have evolved along with the narrative codes and conventions of cinema, the notion of truly observational filming became increasingly fraught. Spectacle and sensationalism along with Modernist elements of fragmentation or *détournement*, collage, abstraction and a general rejection of the transparency of realist representation all found their way into documentary filmmaking practices. This gave documentary greater leverage to depart from objective truth, with many films employing dramatic effects and image manipulation to argue their point and move further from the established conventions of observational and expository forms towards a more performative approach.

One of the new forms to emerge from the evolution of the documentary genre is the fake documentary, or "mock-documentary" (also known as "mockumentary"), in which fictitious events are presented in documentary format. *WTF is Neurocam* is a fake documentary in that the events being reported are fabricated, but the events themselves are real. The script is entirely based on Project Neurocam's history, drawing from material in the project's archives as

well as a number of blogs kept by Neurocam participants. Another filmmaking style to emerge from documentary practice is *cinéma vérité*, which involves stylised set-ups and a direct interaction between the filmmaker and the subject, with no attempt to conceal the camera or the person making the film. *Cinéma vérité* was originally seen as a way of bringing objective truth back to cinema. *WTF is Neurocam* utilises many of the techniques of *cinéma vérité* to explore its subject matter and convince the viewer of its authenticity. Given that the film is based solidly on something that really did happen, does this mean that we cannot classify it as a mock-documentary? If the film is not presented as a docu-drama and does not fit the definition of a mock-documentary, does it represent a new sub-genre?

Another important aspect of the film's construction and presentation is the way in which it intends to be received by an audience. With a spate of fake documentaries being made over the last decade and presented to an audience *as if* they were real, are we seeing a new genre emerging in which filmmakers are deliberately setting out to mislead audiences and create entertaining hoaxes? Or is this device simply the most effective and compelling way to convey information about a particular subject? And where is *Neurocam* positioned within this spectrum?

This exegesis will examine the film's style, methodology content and as a means of communicating the core theoretical and cultural ideas surrounding unwitting audience participation in *Project Neurocam*.

## Chapter 1: The origins, background and documentation of *Project Neurocam*

*Project Neurocam* began during 2004 with the installation of a supersite billboard. The billboard directed people to a central website, where they were given the opportunity to engage with the project by carrying out a series of interactive 'assignments', without knowing the context or purpose of their actions. Detailed descriptions of the assignments are outlined in chapters 1 – 5 of this document. The project was deliberately set up as a kind of mystery, to drive people to participate out of sheer curiosity, or with the idea that the only way to find out what *Neurocam* was, was to interact with it. To date over one million people worldwide have actively participated in the project.

As the project was staged outside an art context and therefore engaged a broad (non-art) audience, the question was raised as to whether or not to attempt to document the project's outcomes in some form that could be utilised in other contexts – potentially bringing them back to the art world. The primary objective of the project was create a participatory framework that focussed on what the audience brought to the work, but this process did not necessarily preclude the possibility of broadening the scope of the project to include sharing the documentation of the event (retrospectively) with an art world audience.

There have been many participatory art projects within recent art history that have placed a significant emphasis on the documentation of audience engagement for re-presentation online or in galleries. One such example is Jason Maling's 2007 - 2010 participatory work *The Vorticist*, in which he set up a series of 'appointments' with participants who used spinning tops and tracing paper to create unique drawings while being engaged in conversation around various pre-chosen themes. For Maling, it appeared that the appointments and everything that transpired within them made up the work itself, however he meticulously transcribed all of the conversations with hundreds of participants and kept copies of the drawings (participants took home the originals). During 2010 Maling then had a show at Conical gallery where he presented the transcripts of his appointments and the accompanying drawings as an installation. Was the

work in fact the interactive sessions with the audience or the documentation of its outcomes? Or did this constitute two unique works? It is important to note the differing contexts of these two parts to the work; the initial appointments were staged in Maling's studio, whereas the installation was in a space clearly defined as an art gallery. The ways in which the audience engaged with the work in these different contexts would have come with its own implicit parameters for engagement – thus altering the reading of the work. Upon entering Maling's studio for their appointments, participants did not know what was going to happen or how they would be expected to engage, whereas the installation in the gallery had its own clear set of rules as with any viewer/artwork relationship within a designated art space. Maling maintains that the interactive component was the key focus of the work, but is unclear about the relative importance or positioning of its documentation.

As with Maling's *Vorticist* work, most artists working with participatory projects spend a significant amount of time documenting the outcomes of the work. This is usually done with video, photography and audio recordings or all of these formats. Sometimes the interactive nature of the work, like *The Vorticist*, will also produce physical artefacts produced by the participants, which also find their way into the documentation. What I am questioning here is *why* artists feel compelled to put so much focus on the documentation of these types of works. Is it because they want the work to reach a broader audience beyond the limitations of only those who participate directly? Is it to produce tangible outcomes that can be used for future grant applications or when applying for shows in galleries? For me this preoccupation with documentation seems to highlight a kind of insecurity about the work itself. Why can it not stand alone with the focus being on the experiential nature of direct audience participation? There seems to be a lot of pressure on artists to produce tangible outcomes, which partly explains the pathological need to document everything in sight. It could be said (by the art world) that one is not really an artist if one does not show in galleries or have something to physically *show* an art audience. Perhaps this lies at the core of a seeming insecurity about producing works that stand alone as unique one-off interactions between the work and the audience. Let us look to some more examples to further unpack the question of participatory art's documentation before attempting to position *Project Neurocam* within this debate.

During the Melbourne International Arts Festival in 2005, Italian artists Renato Cuocolo and Roberta Bosetti set up a participatory work entitled *Private Eye*, in which individual participants were invited into a hotel room occupied by Bosetti, who put on a seductive performance calculatingly designed to elicit a secret from each participant. Once this confession had been extracted, a knock on the door was Bosetti's cue to usher participants to a hiding place behind a false wall, where concealed peep holes allowed them to witness the same scene played out with the next member of the audience. Cuocolo and Bosetti only took a limited number of appointments for the work and did not make any attempt to document it. People who missed out on attending the work could only experience it second hand, through verbal descriptions from others. On the festival website, Cuocolo and Bosetti did not reveal any information about what participants could expect when engaging with the work. The work has subsequently been written about in various publications and websites with the occasional accompanying (staged) promotional image, but it seems clear that Cuocolo and Bosetti were not interested in documenting the work for any other presentational purposes within the art world. They seemed to be content with the fact that the work consisted of an exclusive interaction between the audience and the framework of the project – something that would only ever be experienced by a select few lucky enough to book before it was sold out.

In opposition to the absence of documentation in Cuocolo and Bosetti's interactive work, American artist Miranda July makes documentation of her work the primary focus. In her 2002 – 2009 participatory project *Learning To Love You More* (LTLYM), July uses a central website to engage an audience in undertaking a series of 'assignments'. Some of the assignments she posted on the website include:

- Interview someone who has experienced war.
- Record the sound that is keeping you awake.
- Make a portrait of your friend's desires.
- Give advice to yourself in the past.
- Re-enact a scene from a movie that made someone else cry.
- Make an exhibition of the art in your parent's house.
- Act out someone else's argument.
- Ask your family to describe what you do.
- Make a protest sign and protest.
- Spend time with a dying person.

Curate an artist's retrospective in a public place.  
 Recreate an object from someone's past.  
 Make a documentary video about a small child.<sup>3</sup>

Her instructions were for participants to choose an assignment from the website's archives and upload its documentation once completed. With over eight thousand people participating over the project's 7-year duration, the site became a vast repository for all of the documentation of the people's assignments. For July, this documentation was the work and her audience did not have to participate in order to view it. Using this strategy for documenting the ways in which people interacted with the work, July created a culture in which people wanted to engage because they could see what other people were bringing to the work. This also enabled a sense of community and a collaborative notion of the work growing and changing over time. An important aspect of this approach is a clear sense of ownership on the part of the audience – an ability to transparently explore the idea of the audience making the work what it is. July says that:

Like a recipe, meditation practice, or familiar song, the prescriptive nature of these assignments was intended to guide people towards their own experience.<sup>4</sup>

In 2010 the *LTYM* website was acquired by the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and is now seen as a stand-alone artwork.

Considering the above examples of different approaches to the documentation of audience participation, how does Project Neurocam fit into this discussion? In terms of documentation of the work's outcomes, *Project Neurocam* was set up to require participants maintaining meticulous records of their experiences. Each assignment was followed up by a written 'report', which detailed everything that participants had witnessed or experienced during its execution. Photographic 'evidence' and even video footage was sometimes included in the reports. Many

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<sup>3</sup> July, Miranda, "Learning to Love You More" <http://learningtoloveyoumore.com/index.php> (accessed 02 September 2012).

<sup>4</sup> Ibid

of the earlier assignments were run as a series of 'perception assessment' exercises in which participants were encouraged to write in detail about random details in their everyday lives. All of this documentation was compulsory; participants were told that they would be "dismissed from the organisation" upon the failure to complete any of the required reports.

The idea of having participants document their experiences while interacting with the project was not specifically set up as a way of recording the outcomes of the project. The primary reason for asking this of participants was to generate a higher degree of commitment to their involvement – to make them put in some real effort, rather than passively observe events around them like an audience at the theatre. Once it became apparent that the documentation in itself created its own unique kind of artwork, this raised the question of what to do with it. With thousands of people interacting with the project on an ongoing basis, the sheer volume of material was already significant within a few months and growing steadily. The main problem with exhibiting or publishing any of this material while the project was still active, was compromising the anonymous nature of the project itself. For an audience to engage with something they saw as a mystery, it would have immediately contextualised it as art if the documentation were to make its way into an art context. But what if the documentation was presented in a non-art context?

The answer to the immediate problems inherent in wanting to use the project's archives to reach a broader audience than those who were directly participating very much solved itself. One of the first generation Neurocam 'operatives', an operative going by the alias of "Capcoincidence"(real name Graham Henstock), had been maintaining an online web log prior to his involvement with Neurocam. This blog was very much a diary of his daily encounters, focussing on anything interesting that he thought might entertain his readers. When he became involved in Neurocam, Henstock started to blog almost exclusively about his experiences with the project. On the 29<sup>th</sup> January, 2004 he wrote:

I'm sure you all know how obsessed I've become with Neurocam, so I'm sure none of you will be surprised by the fact that I've been accepted into the Neurocam



organisation. My acceptance e-mail arrived two days ago and the whole thing has turned very Fight Club-esq.<sup>5</sup>

Once the Neurocam community noticed Henstock's blog (which turned up on a basic Google search of "Neurocam"), hundreds of operatives followed suit and started their own Neurocam blogs. Within weeks an online search on Neurocam revealed several pages all linking to various first-hand accounts from Neurocam participants detailing their latest experiences. This rapidly evolved into a series of online forums dedicated to collectively solving the Neurocam mystery.

While this self-perpetuating documentation was a good way of promoting the project to a wider audience without compromising the project's integrity, it was not without its problems. One of the significant pitfalls of having an online community discussing every detail about engagement with the project was the lack of confidentiality regarding the assignments themselves. Initially it was important that participants not only had the sense that they were operating in isolation when engaging with Neurocam, but also that their assignments were unique – as if created exclusively for them. Once other people had talked about their experiences with a particular assignment, it was no longer a surprise to others who received it and therefore lacked the mystery and intrigue. This forced us to adapt Neurocam's operational model to accommodate the formation of online communities. More assignments were written with a focus on not giving all participants the same tasks. This also gave rise to 'group assignments' and assignments designed specifically to allow participants in different geographical location to interact with each other.

The formation of Neurocam's online communities also had a lot of benefits beyond providing a means to engage with a broader audience. As the project was initially set up with a view to providing experiences exclusively for individuals, the rise of the online communities added another layer to the work. It allowed participants to work together with a collective goal – to collaboratively construct their own idea of what Neurocam was. This created endless speculation and theories about who or what was behind the project, which then become an

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<sup>5</sup> Henstock, Graham, "Jumping on the Bandwagon " <http://capcoincidence.blogspot.com.au> (accessed 01 August 2012).

integral part of the work. Neurocam, it seemed, was whatever its participants projected onto it. During 2006 Neurocam even had its own Wikipedia page featuring a pastiche of misinformation such as:

In mid 2005, a substance named Compound H67T was mentioned many times in conjunction with Neurocam, specifically by operatives higher up in the organization. Claims were made that the substance had complications when tested on rhesus macaque, tonkean macaque, and pan troglodytes versus primates. It was also noted that experiments on homosapiens would be conducted.<sup>6</sup>

As illustrated by the Wiki example, it became clear that Neurocam's online presence was in no way an objective record of the project's history. Within a year of Henstock's first blog post, most of the information posted online about Neurocam was complete fabrication, with participants gravitating towards something more like creative writing than any attempt to accurately describe their experiences with the project. To the broader audience who were not directly participating, Neurocam became reduced to layers upon layers of inconclusive speculation. While this was advantageous in terms of maintaining the project's anonymity, it no longer served as any kind of valid way of documenting the project from the participant's point of view.

Still not wanting to use the project's archives as a means of documenting the projects outcomes, I started to think about the idea of making a documentary about Neurocam as a way of communicating the project's central themes to another audience outside of the immediate participatory audience. With no clear strategy in mind, I began to surreptitiously film some of the project's group assignments using hidden cameras. At this point I was open to the idea of allowing the film to encompass what went on behind the scenes as well – using the documentary format to interview those behind the curtain (making the work) as well as those engaging directly with the work. This approach would have constituted a kind of exposé of the project – a bottom line revealing all aspects of its creation and execution. This approach would have signified a definitive end to the project's ongoing interactive operations, as audience participation would have been rendered pointless once Neurocam had been demystified. It was

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<sup>6</sup> Wikipedia, "Neurocam"  
[http://deletionpedia.dbatley.com/w/index.php?title=Neurocam\\_International\\_\(deleted\\_18\\_Feb\\_2008\\_at\\_03:36\)](http://deletionpedia.dbatley.com/w/index.php?title=Neurocam_International_(deleted_18_Feb_2008_at_03:36)) (accessed 20 Septmber 2012).

possible that some people would have continued to engage with the project once the terms of engagement became transparent, but this was not an area that I was interested in exploring. To make a film *exposing* Neurocam could only be done once the project had reached some kind of conclusion or the decision had been made to shut it down. At this point I did not want to terminate the project, as the idea of making a film about it was less important than the project itself. I did however continue to document whatever I could without compromising the participants' experiences.

After collating a significant amount of footage focussing on audience participation, the objectives for the film, in conjunction with the PhD research, became clearer: I wanted to make a film that, along with the writing, explored the social, cultural and art historical implications of creating contemporary artworks that exist outside an art context with no predefined parameters for engagement. The film was intended to exist as a stand-alone artwork, which specifically examined the social and cultural significance of direct participation in the project, without compromising the work by revealing who or what was behind it. With this approach, the film would be able to take the audience on the journey of the Neurocam participant, while allowing the project itself to continue to evolve.

## Chapter 2: Attempting to position *WTF is Neurocam* within filmmaking practice

On first appearances, *WTF is Neurocam* is a low budget documentary film about a mysterious underground organisation known as *Neurocam*. Actor and documentary filmmaker William Emmons embarks upon an investigation to expose who or what is behind Neurocam. The film incorporates an impromptu hand-held style along with footage taken from a hidden spy camera worn by Emmons while he is engaged by the organisation to carry out a succession of increasingly bizarre tasks. We also see particularly low quality footage of interviews carried out by a small number of individuals involved with Neurocam, who are willing to talk about their experiences on camera. We are told that this footage was taken by the interviewees themselves, from various international locations and sent to Emmons via postal mail. This unorthodox approach is explained by Emmons, who tells us that the film does not have the budget to send him around the world to interview these people in person. The focus of his inquiry is based in Melbourne Australia, where Neurocam activity is publicly evident on billboards and in a newspaper article in *The Age*.

Towards the end of the film we see footage taken from a surveillance camera mounted in a bar, a POV, which breaks with the convention of the documentary format. This footage is not explained by Emmons or his crew in the context of the narrative; it is presumably from another source – throwing into question the authenticity of the documentary itself. At this point we realise that the film is most likely a fake documentary – possibly a mockumentary, to coin a relatively new neologism.

Once it is established that the film has been fabricated, this provides an explanation for other stylistic devices used in the context of the narrative. The story is embellished through the relationship between Emmons and his “DOP”, a character whose invisible presence behind the camera acts as a kind of sounding board to counterpoint Emmons’ speculations about what they are uncovering. This device places the film more within the genre of drama, especially as the relationship between narrator and cameraman deepens to the point where we see the

characters' personalities start to emerge. As the investigation into the primary subject matter develops and the character of Josh (the DOP) steps out from behind the camera, the film increasingly departs from the faux-documentary style, resembling something more like a mystery thriller. This trajectory however, is always brought back to something loosely resembling video journalism, as the direct to-camera content intercut with POV scenes shot with the spy camera remain the primary vehicle to convey the narrative.

During the last scene where we see footage shot from another POV not explained by the narrative, this device is used to question the idea of the film's authorship without completely undermining the documentary style. As we are watching a film attempting to uncover a mysterious underground organisation who are very good at covering their tracks, to suddenly see footage taken by unknown others immediately asks the question why this footage was included in the edit and how the filmmakers came into possession of it. This theme is further perpetuated by the last few seconds of the film where the main protagonist is violently accosted by three unknown characters, who have set up another camera to film the ensuing proceedings. This dramatic turn of events in relation to some of the dialogue suggests that another kind of film is being made – a kind of meta-documentary appropriating content from the original documentary.

In considering the idea that the footage has changed ownership and that what we are seeing is in fact a kind of documentary *about* a documentary, it is ultimately difficult to position the film. The film's editing also supports the idea of the content being subsumed by a third party with a different agenda. In a typical documentary we wouldn't usually see or hear elements such as the presenter/director asking the DOP to take a certain kind of shot, or any dialogue between the cast and crew. The way the film is cut seems to include all of the things that would typically be left on the cutting room floor. The dialogue between Emmons and the DOP is sometimes cut together as the focus of the narrative, with total disregard for the fact that Emmons is setting up shots to report on events much like a newsreader. We often hear the DOP cueing the action and Emmons' character shifting from an on and off-camera persona. Seeing these details,

which give insight into the filmmakers' process of making a documentary, shifts the focus from the rehearsed on-camera material, to a scenario in which the video journalistic approach to gathering content is seen to be failing. From this another kind of narrative emerges, in which more about the subject of enquiry is revealed.

Within the film's 'spycamera' scenes some of the footage is real, taken during Project Neurocam's execution during 2004 – 2011 by operative 'plants', who surreptitiously filmed real operatives on group assignments. These scenes are not labelled or differentiated in any way from the fabricated spy camera scenes, so viewers with no prior knowledge of the project would not be able to detect them. While these scenes might add to the film's perceived authenticity due to not having to rely on acting, art direction, props and locations, the intention is not to use them as a specific device to make an argument for the film being a documentary rather than outright fiction. The use of both non-labelled real footage and fabricated material is a stylistic device not common in filmmaking practice. Extensive research into filmmaking history does not reveal any obvious precedents for this technique. It is common to see 're-creations' or 'file footage' in the context of real and fake documentaries, but rare to see a fabrication that uses real content without drawing attention to the fact and presenting an obvious reason or agenda. This potential quandary makes it difficult to position *WTF* – is it more of a documentary than a fabrication? To what extent is it a drama based on real events? Can it be labelled a drama when it includes footage that is real? To further explore the question of the film's style and genre, one must look to the history of documentary filmmaking to draw some comparisons.

Although it could be argued that the Lumiere Brothers' first films documenting everyday events can be considered documentaries, the specific origins of the documentary genre are unclear. It follows that the documentary format has been latent in cinema since its inception during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. With technological advances in visual and audio recording devices, it was possible to accurately capture and represent reality, giving rise to an unmediated, objective and irrefutable view of the world. As Elizabeth Cowie points out, this mechanical reproduction of reality is "closely linked to the development of modernity, for the documentary asserts itself as

the genre of the objective knowability of the world.”<sup>7</sup> Cowie asserts that the realism of documentary was initially dismissed by critics who, drawing on the claims of romanticism, saw it as lacking the interpretation and intervention of the artist’s subjectivity. These early rejections of documentary film’s validity were put aside when the avant-garde filmmaking practices of the 1920s led to documentary adopting the narrative codes and conventions of cinema, allowing as Bill Nichols proposes “the language of sensationalism” to “readily insinuate itself into the protocols of science.”<sup>8</sup>

Once documentary began to absorb increasingly more modernist strategies such as *détournement*, collage, abstraction and a general rejection of the transparency of realist representation, it began to be seen by early documentarists Grierson and Flaherty as “an artistic endeavor, a creative enterprise through which raw material was transformed into meaningful narratives.”<sup>9</sup> As Nichols points out, documentary had rapidly departed from an objective record of reality to become something that “imaginatively reconstructed the look of the world with images, or shots, taken of this world.”<sup>10</sup>

With documentary no longer being constrained to a didactic notion of factual discourse, new forms began to emerge that rejected the binary opposition between fact and fiction. Within the fact-fiction continuum, we began to see the emergence of *cinéma vérité*, Direct Cinema, docudramas, and more recently, mock-documentaries (or mockumentaries).

*Cinéma vérité* is characterised by stylised set-ups and a direct interaction between the filmmaker and the subject, with no attempt to conceal the camera or the person making the film.

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<sup>7</sup> Cowie, Elizabeth. *Specters of the Real: Documentary Time and Art*. Duke University Press, 2007, 89.

<sup>8</sup> Nichols, Bill. "Documentary Film and the Modernist Avant-Garde." *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 27, No. 4. (2001): 587.

<sup>9</sup> Hight, Craig and Roscoe, Jane. *Faking It: Mock-Documentary and the Subversion of Factuality*. Manchester University Press 2001, 7.

<sup>10</sup> Nichols, Bill. "Documentary Film and the Modernist Avant-Garde." *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 27, No. 4. (2001): 596.

*Cinéma vérité* was originally seen as a way of bringing objective truth back to cinema by making the filmmaking process transparent to the audience. *Cinéma vérité* is associated with the French documentary movement, but its core ideas were also developed contemporaneously in America and referred too as *Direct Cinema*. In establishing 5 'modes' of documentary film styles (Poetic, Expository, Observational, Reflexive and Participatory), Bill Nichols draws heavily from the techniques of *Cinéma vérité* and *Direct Cinema* to define the observational and reflexive modes in which the camera moves with the subject/action, allowing viewers to reach their own conclusions. The reflexive mode de-mystifies the process of a film's construction to encourage the viewer to develop a more sophisticated and critical attitude to the content. In contemporary filmmaking practice Nichols' reflexive mode has become subsumed by the observational mode and is simply known as *observational documentary*.

Docudramas attempt to adhere to known historical facts, while allowing a greater or lesser degree of dramatic license in peripheral details and where there are gaps in the historical record. Docudramas often film their reconstructed events in the actual locations in which the historical events occurred and voice-over content is based on the actual words of real-life persons, as recorded in historical documents.

While the exact origins of the mockumentary genre are unknown, an early example is a short segment on the Swiss spaghetti harvest that appeared on the British television program *Panorama* in 1957 as an April Fool's Day joke. The term mockumentary first entered American vernacular when *This Is Spinal Tap* director Rob Reiner used it in interviews to describe the film. Jane Roscoe and Craig Hight claim that mockumentary not only subverts the previously privileged status of documentary as a means of accurately capturing and representing reality, but also suggests a new relationship between audiences and the genre. For them, "the appropriation of documentary codes and conventions is used not so much to anchor the argument in the real world or to bolster claims to truth, but rather to offer critical commentary".<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Hight, Craig and Roscoe, Jane. *Faking It: Mock-Documentary and the Subversion of Factuality*: Manchester University Press 2001,50.



Roscoe and Hight do not include media hoaxes such as faked April Fool's Day news stories as part of the mockumentary genre, but are careful to define mockumentaries as being limited to *fictional* texts only. They recognise that there are varying degrees of subversion involved in fake documentaries and posit a framework of analysis built on three "degrees" of "moc-docness": parody, critique and hoax, and deconstruction.

*WTF is Neurocam* utilises cinematic techniques adopted from *cinéma vérité*, docudrama and mockumentary – making it difficult to ultimately position. Whilst it can be seen as a dramatised re-enactment of the historical event of *Project Neurocam*, it also sets up a direct relationship between the filmmaker and subject without attempting to conceal the presence of the camera. *WTF* appropriates many of the conventions of documentary to explore its subject matter and can be seen as a critical commentary *on* Project Neurocam, but unlike a mockumentary, it employs these documentary strategies to depict *real* events. To further examine the style, genre and positioning of *WTF* within the context of filmmaking practice, we must look to some comparisons.

In 1999, Australian director Maciej Wszelaki shot and directed a documentary entitled *Original Schtick* that exposed an elaborate con perpetrated by American artist Bob Fischer during a trip to Melbourne to exhibit his work. Like *WTF*, the film employs a hand-held *cinéma vérité* style and is shot on a small budget by Wszelaki himself. Wszelaki follows Fischer relentlessly during his short stay and attempts to interview everyone involved in producing and exhibiting his 'collaborative' artworks. Stylistically the film is very raw and makes no attempt to hide references to the filmmaking process and the sometimes-intrusive presence of Wszelaki and his camera. In one scene when Wszelaki tries to catch Fischer out in a highly unethical art deal, Fischer looks directly to camera and shouts "turn that fucking camera off". Wszelaki pretends to stop filming and backs away, reframing the shot from a position that Fischer will be less likely to notice. In another scene, Fisher, furious at being filmed while in a vulnerable position, tells Wszelaki "you're doing nothing but masturbating into the camera".

When *Original Schtick* was first screened on Australian television many people thought that it was a mockumentary – that Fisher’s outrageous personality and shoddy dealings were just too outlandish to be true. Further debate was sparked by the fact that one of the film’s producers, Peter George, also featured in the documentary as Fischer’s personal assistant. Viewers thought that the filmmaker’s decision to place George in the film was a way of contriving events to further sensationalise the narrative. In various interviews, Wszelaki and the film’s producers defended the film and reinforced repeatedly that it was real and that they had not done anything to subvert the series of events portraying Fischer’s character. Wszelaki claimed that he had no previous knowledge of Fischer’s dubious agenda and simply followed the action as the story unfolded. As far as he was concerned, the film was initiated as a straightforward documentary on an American artist exhibiting in Melbourne. Fischer, a man not shy around the camera, was apparently horrified when he saw the film for the first time and realised that Wszelaki had painted him in a negative light.

Stylistically the film is very similar to *WTF* in the way that it follows the action by focusing on a main protagonist/subject and his activities over a number of months. Both films utilise what Nichols’ defines as the observational mode of documentary filmmaking, combined with elements of *cinéma vérité* in which the camera and the filmmaking process itself becomes a device that lends credibility to the narrative. Both films also appear to begin with no preconceived conclusions – taking the audience on a kind of journey of discovery with no predefined outcomes. It is also interesting the note that *WTF* and *Original Schtick* were both edited by leading Australian editor Jane Usher, who is a major proponent of utilising an editing style that shows the viewer more of the process of a documentary film’s construction as a means of enhancing authenticity. *Original Schtick* was officially released as a documentary and in spite of claims that it is in fact a fabrication; it is still positioned firmly within that genre.

Another film that relates stylistically and conceptually to *WTF* is Rémy Belvaux’s 1992 mockumentary *Man Bites Dog*, in which a crew of filmmakers follow a serial killer, recording his horrific crimes over a number of months. While the filmmakers appear to start out as dispassionate observers, they find themselves getting caught up in the increasingly chaotic and

nihilistic violence of subject's world. This film also draws from *cinéma vérité* and observational documentary filmmaking and can be seen as a critique of capitalist value systems and the dehumanising effects of modern society. In spite of the fact that the film is clearly a fabrication due to the obvious moral, ethical and legal restrictions inherent in documenting such controversial subject matter, it manages to adhere to the documentary format so convincingly that the audience is forced to consider the politics of the relationship between filmmakers and human subjects. In considering the compromises necessary to make such a film, the film becomes a deconstruction of the moral and ethical pretensions adopted by *all* documentarists. *WTF* also explores the complex relationship between filmmaker and subject in the context of the hypothetical moral, ethical and legal boundaries involved in extracting unique and engaging content. Using the devices of mockumentary, these themes can be played out without any real-world consequences, while still putting the audience in the position of having to make their own moral and ethical judgements.

A more recent film that shares a similar niche to *WTF* is the American film *Catfish*, created in 2010 by Henry Joost and Ariel Schulman. This is another low budget film presented as a documentary, which unravels an intriguing mystery in which the filmmakers and a colleague try to expose the true identity of a woman one of them finds himself in an online relationship with. Like *WTF*, the film relies heavily on the relationship between the filmmakers and their colleague to create a narrative around the film's subject of enquiry. *Catfish* also uses footage taken surreptitiously to create the sense that this content could not have been recorded using other means – the only way they could expose their subjects was to record them without their knowledge or consent. This device increases the level of intrigue, the sense of taboo and raises the question of ethics as the filmmakers relentlessly steer the narrative towards an all too neat conclusion. Like with *Original Schtick*, *Catfish* was received with much scepticism when it premiered at Sundance and many initially thought the film was a fake documentary. Joost and Schulman have defended the film's authenticity rigorously and even appeared angry and defensive in response to allegations that the film's content was fabricated. Since the film's release, speculation around its authenticity has run rife; some have said that the entire film is

fake, while others have claimed that the filmmakers have only fabricated certain key events to enhance the narrative.

In 2012 Joost and Schulman finally admitted that the entire film was scripted and that they had used actors for all of the key roles. It was a fake documentary, presented as if it were real and promoted by its makers as real. This kind of hoax is not a new thing within the history of film and has been perpetrated frequently over the last few decades with such offerings as Peter Jackson's *Forgotten Silver* (1995), *Alien Autopsy* (1995) and *The Blair Witch Project* (1999). All of these films were presented with the pretext of the filmmakers somehow coming into possession of 'found footage' or documenting unique events purported to be real.

The key question to consider is whether presenting fake documentaries as real constitutes a filmmaking genre, style or technique, or can be categorised as 'entertaining pranks'. It would follow that a film's positioning within this spectrum is entirely dependent on the filmmakers' intentions – are they deliberately setting out to mislead an audience (April Fool's Day hoaxes etc), or are they using a particular storytelling device as the best way to convey information about a particular subject or set of ideas? If a film is consciously deceiving its audience, what are the reasons for doing so? If we put aside the obvious hoaxes (*Forgotten Silver*, *Alien Autopsy* etc) designed to entertain or titillate, we see a more complex model emerging. *The Blair Witch Project* is based on the legend of the ghost of Elly Kedward, a woman banished from the Blair Township (latter-day Burkittsville) for witchcraft in 1785. The directors incorporated that part of the legend, along with allusions to the Salem Witch Trials and *The Crucible*, to play on themes of injustice to those accused of being witches. By choosing to present the film's content to the audience as 'real' by fabricating the backstory of the footage being found in the woods, are the directors using this deception as a device to make the film more terrifying to the viewer, or is there some other agenda at play? Certainly the premise of the footage being real gives the film significantly more impact, but does it in any way contribute to the cultural significance of the film by changing the relationship between the subject matter and the audience? If the directors intended to tease out the cultural themes inherent in the idea of legends, then perpetuating a

fabricated legend may have been an interesting and effective way to do this, as it positions the audience within the story in a more direct way.

In attempting to understand Joost and Schulman's motivations for deceiving the audience with *Catfish*, it is unclear what they were trying to achieve. Clearly the film engages the viewer to a greater extent when we think it is real, so is the deception simply a way of making the story more interesting and entertaining as we see it unfold in the context of a documentary exposé? Joost and Schulman could have made the film as fiction from the outset, but they deliberately chose to make it look like a real observational documentary, even going as far as to say in an interview with MTV after the film's premiere at Sundance: (Schulman) "It gives us too much credit, though. If this were fake, then it would be ... (Joost) Yeah, we would be so much smarter than we actually are."<sup>12</sup> In considering the film's subject matter, it is conceivable that the device of surreptitiously making a fake documentary does in fact offer a critical commentary on cyber relationships within the context of social media where everything is taken at face value. It is also possible that Joost and Schulman were offering a critique on the validity of the documentary form in relation to the perceived intentions of its authors. Given the subjectivity of contemporary documentaries content, can authenticity be reduced to the author's word?

When considering *WTF*'s positioning within this debate, it has to be taken into account that the subject matter is based on something that exists *in reality*. *Project Neurocam* was a *real* project that engaged participants in a series of real life activities as part of an art project. *WTF* informs us, via a central narrator who engages in a video-journalistic enquiry, what the project looked liked from the point of view of someone on the inside – an *actual* participant. Therefore it can be argued that any level of subterfuge or fabrication within the films (implicit) claim of authenticity or its documentary presentation was simply used as means of examining the Neurocam project. In order to ascertain whether this presents an effective strategy within filmmaking style and technique, we need to further unpack the film's intentions in terms of how it will be interpreted

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<sup>12</sup> Warner, Kara, "'Catfish' Filmmakers Respond to 'Is It Real?'" <http://www.mtv.com/news/articles/1647028/catfish-filmmakers-respond-it-real-debate.jhtml> (accessed 14 July 2012).

by an audience. Does *WTF* deliberately attempt to conceal the fact that it is a fake documentary?

In considering how the audience reads a documentary film's perceived authenticity, one must look to the film's credits. *Catfish* credits only the filmmakers themselves and thanks the supposedly 'real' subjects of the documentary. Given that the film was revealed to be fake, this means the filmmakers must have reached some kind of agreement with the cast regarding them having to forgo being credited for their acting contributions. This highly unorthodox procedure shows a significant degree of commitment on the part of the actors to the idea of a film that deliberately sets out to mislead audiences. One can imagine that many actors would not be complicit in such actions potentially detrimental to their careers. The other factor here, is that it was very important that the filmmakers chose actors who were not at all known – if audience members had recognised any of the cast from other productions the proverbial cat would have been well and truly out of the bag before the planned exposé.

*WTF's* credits are seemingly more transparent and introduce a writer and director, which perhaps reveal the level of fabrication immediately. But not necessarily – many documentary filmmakers who appear in front of the camera also have writers and directors on board. Emmons never states that he is the director of the film and Emmons and Williams being credited as themselves, does not reveal much. Crediting Joshua Dean Williams as the "DOP" does not immediately infer that he is an actor playing the role of a camera operator. We already know (within the context of the narrative) that there is another person shooting a lot of the footage as well, so it is no surprise to see another DOP listed in the crew credits. The rest of the cast (or subjects), whose names are not revealed within the narrative, are listed either as real names or as 'operative names', with their 'real' names being withheld for privacy reasons. Some of the operatives with speaking parts are credited either as themselves, or as actors playing operatives, which is somewhat inconclusive. Presumably one would have to obtain release forms for all who appear in the film, so it is possible that cast members who are credited with such descriptions such as "female passerby #2" or "costume shop sales assistant" are real people who have agreed to be in the film. As for the operatives, the small number who are

credited with names rather than aliases could simply be those who did not chose to remain anonymous.

To further interrogate the positioning of a film by the detail contained within its credits, let us discuss another example of a mockumentary with similarities to *WTF* and *Catfish*. *Lake Mungo*, written and directed in 2008 by Joel Anderson, is a seemingly real documentary about an Australian family coping with the tragic death of their teenaged daughter. The film features realistic looking news bulletins and interviews with the girl's friends and family in an attempt to paint a harrowing portrait of the complexities of the grieving process. Many viewers would have had no reason to question the film's authenticity during its 87-minute duration – in spite of some questionable supernatural themes. As soon as the film's credits roll, everything is revealed – the audience can see immediately that they were tricked as all of the documentaries' subjects are revealed to be actors playing a role. Another Australian director, Scott Ryan, does exactly the same thing with his 2005 film *The Magician*, which masquerades as a documentary about a Melbourne hit man, who, during the film's credits, is revealed to be Ryan himself.

Within the context of films drawing from the codes and conventions of documentary filmmaking, there is clearly a diverse range of strategies employed by filmmakers to position these films within their respective audiences. While many films use the mockumentary format as a transparent device to explore their subject matter or construct a narrative, other films seek to conceal the fact that they are fabrications to engage the audience in more complex ways other than obvious hoaxes. Within this spectrum, *WTF Is Neurocam* utilises cinematic techniques adopted from *cinéma vérité*, docudrama and mockumentary to create a film that is not clearly established as fictional, but also does not attempt to conceal the fact that it is a combination of content *based* on real events and footage *of* real events. *WTF* uses the codes and conventions of documentary as the most effective strategy to convincingly portray what it is like to participate in *Project Neurocam* from the perspective of the project's audience, while allowing the project to continue to operate covertly. In terms of the PhD research, the film focuses solely on the project's participatory elements, while the writing examines the project's social, cultural and art historical context.

### Chapter 3: Positioning *Project Neurocam* as a model within participatory art practice

The film opens with a dramatic scene in which someone knocks on an apartment door while recording events with a video camera. A dishevelled looking man who appears to know the unseen cameraman opens the door suspiciously. An argument ensues in which the dishevelled looking man, referred to as "Will", asks the cameraman to stop filming and heatedly pushes the camera away when he doesn't relent. Something is mentioned about "destroying something infinitely more valuable than some crappy expose" and Will slams the door in the cameraman's face. A super then takes us back in time to 12 months earlier where the story begins. This editing decision gives the viewer a glimpse of intriguing events out of context as a kind of narrative hook to engage them to the story.

We are then introduced to actor and documentary filmmaker William Emmons, who embarks on an investigative journey to discover the truth behind an enigmatic underground organisation known simply as "Neurocam". His strategy is straightforward; he attempts to infiltrate Neurocam by signing up to become one of their 'operatives'. This soon leads to Emmons undertaking a series of increasingly bizarre tasks of questionable legality in his search for who or what is facilitating what he initially sees as an elaborate hoax.

After the idea of Neurocam has been established, the film is essentially broken into 3 acts:

1. A preliminary investigation into what Neurocam is.
2. Emmons infiltrating Neurocam and undertaking a number of 'assignments' to gain further understanding.
3. Emmons getting a promotion and the investigation (as well as the film) stalling, Emmons withdrawing from the film and Williams taking over in an attempt to find out what happened to Emmons as well as complete the exposé.

The first act is primarily concerned with Emmons undertaking a typically journalistic investigation into the topic of enquiry. He examines the Neurocam website, asks passers by on



the street next to a Neurocam billboard what they think Neurocam is and attempts to get information from the billboard company hosting the site. The investigation then moves on to Neurocam's online presence and a series of interviews with international and local Neurocam participants talking about their Neurocam experiences. During this time Emmons applies to join Neurocam by submitting an online application, under the operative name of "Tript", and then receives a series of 'initiation assignments'. All of this activity is rigorously documented by the ever-present camera and we start to see a relationship form between Emmons and the unseen camera operator referred to as "Josh", who begins to become as much part of the investigation as Emmons himself. The dialogue between the two sets up a kind of running commentary about the strangeness of the situation. This act ends with Emmons becoming officially welcomed into the organisation and being told by the 'director of operations' that an understanding of what Neurocam *is* will be gained from the assignments he will be given. At this point he is none the wiser about the true nature of Neurocam.

During the first act we can clearly see the lack of context afforded by Neurocam as a participatory art project. Emmons, much like any typical participant, attempts to create a context or means of engaging with the project based on attempting to find out what it is. In doing so, the experiences he has and his responses to them become inextricably linked with his day-to-day life. Without a context, definition or set of rules for engagement, Neurocam cannot be positioned, and therefore separated from everyday life. The idea of eroding the boundaries between art and life was first explored by the Futurists, which was then taken vigorously by the Dadaists who claimed that "life is far more interesting than art"<sup>13</sup> and that "the modern artist does not paint, he creates directly."<sup>14</sup> Dada sought to reduce the universal value and cultural importance of art and introduce it into daily life. The Dadaists proposed that by reducing everything to an initial simplicity, the creative process became subject to the subtle and random nuances of life itself.

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<sup>13</sup> Tzara, Tristan. "Lecture on Dada." (1922).  
<http://www.arthistoryarchive.com/arthistory/dada/Tristan-Tzara.html> [accessed 10 September 2012].

<sup>14</sup> Clark, Timothy. "The Crisis of Modern Art: Dada and Surrealism." (1967).  
<http://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/si/modernart.html> [accessed 10 September 2012].

The Dadaist notion of direct creativity was not without its contradictions, as Peter Bürger demonstrated by examining its various inconsistencies and revealing the utopian dream underlying it.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, all of the creative possibilities at the time were dependent on the use of tools, techniques and technology that the Dadaists, according to their manifesto, claimed should be excluded from the creative process. Without access to the means of making work other than self-sacrificial forms of expression, Dada was ultimately condemned to vandalism and nihilism. As Timothy Clark points out, "Dada flared up and burnt out as an art sabotaging art in the name of reality and reality in the name of art."<sup>16</sup>

In spite of Dada's failure to find a way of eroding the boundaries between art and life, they paved the way for further explorations of this idea within art history. American artist Allan Kaprow, who was best known for his pioneering work with experimental artistic events (happenings), claimed that "The line between art and life should be kept as fluid, and perhaps indistinct, as possible."<sup>17</sup> The Dadaist idea of making the creative process subject to chance could also be seen in the work of Jackson Pollock, whose paintings became more about the process than the result. The line of demarcation between art and life became blurred with every chaotic splatter of acrylic on his canvases. In making art that focused on process and experience, we began to see a shift away from single (static) works of art towards something more open-ended in which the relationships between the artist, audience and the work were evolving. In the context of social evolution, according to sociologists Ian Sutherland and Sophia Krzys Acord, "knowledge production emerges in the connection between oeuvre and daily life"<sup>18</sup> It would follow that the boundaries between experience and our reflection and expression of it

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<sup>15</sup> Bürger, Peter. *Theory of the Avant-Garde*: University of Minnesota Press, 1984.

<sup>16</sup> Clark, Timothy. "The Crisis of Modern Art: Dada and Surrealism." (1967).  
<http://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/si/modernart.html> [accessed 10 September 2012].

<sup>17</sup> Kaizen, William, "Framed Space: Allan Kaprow and the Spread of Painting"  
<http://www.mitpressjournals.org/doi/abs/10.1162/152638103322751074> (accessed 15 October 2012).

<sup>18</sup> Lish, Aaron. "Art and Life Through Interaction." (2012).  
<http://www.scribd.com/doc/93408737/Art-and-Life-Through-Interaction-v2> [accessed 30 November 2012].

are always and already blurred and it is simply a matter of politics, or preference on where to draw the line.

It is important to note that the discussion of art disappearing into life has thus far been contextualised within the art world – even the Dadaist notion of abolishing the boundaries between art and life was born from an art movement's manifesto. If we are to consider Emmons' experiences in the first act of the film, he is clearly not aware that he is having an art experience or being part of the creation of a collaborative, participatory artwork. The film's script deliberately steers away from any art historical references in the course of the investigation as Emmons is engaging with the project as a mainstream journalist – not someone who is investigating an established art project. From this perspective, it is not disingenuous to presume that the project does not contain sufficient evidence to pursue this line of enquiry. The focus is on the ambiguity of Emmons' experiences and the ways in which the audience are forced to draw their own conclusions as the narrative unfolds. In once interview with a 'real' participant, "Operative Ryudo", in response to the question "what is Neurocam?", speculates that Neurocam "might be an experimental art project". Emmons does not explore this idea as a potential lead, as it is just one of many broad speculations about what Neurocam *might* be. To expand on the idea of the blurring of the boundaries between art and life, we must look to a model in which artists are continuing to push the limits of what is considered art by taking art projects to non-art settings.

Firstly, let us discuss the reasons why artists would want to create art outside designated art settings. Within the gallery context, audience participation has seen many incarnations within art history from the early Fluxus Happenings to a long tradition of Performance Art and more recently *Live Art*. While many of these artists have explored immersive experiences and the idea of disrupting distinctions between spectator, participant and artist, there are contextual limits to what can be achieved in a gallery environment. Firstly, any activity taking place in a gallery is immediately perceived as art, so although the audience may not know the exact parameters of engagement, they know that what they engaging with is intended on some level as art. Secondly, there is a significant degree of safety and predictability inherent in the confines

of gallery spaces; institutional bureaucracy would never allow audiences to be physically or mentally harmed in any way. Lastly, we can argue that within contemporary art practice, the sheer volume of participatory art projects that have occurred within galleries throughout the course of art history has undermined the effectiveness of how such work is considered and questioned. With works such as Rirkrit Tiravanija's *Pad Thai* (1990) at the Paula Allen Gallery in New York where he rejected traditional art objects altogether and instead cooked and served Thai curry for exhibition visitors, one must ask the question: Do artists have to go to greater extremes within art institutional contexts to have the same effect on audiences in 2012? Unless Tiravanija was attempting to effect mere sensationalism, it seems clear that his work is pushing the boundaries of a new kind of artist/audience relationship based on direct experience rather than exchangeable commodities.

To get beyond these contextual limitations, some artists have begun to make work in other real-world contexts. Michael Newman points out that:

By hosting these art projects, or experiments, "off-site" in unconventional settings, but in settings which are actually more appropriate to the subject matter at hand, there is a hope that the work will have a stronger effect on the viewer through the work's unexpectedness.<sup>19</sup>

What Newman fails to mention here is the distinction between off-site art projects that are still labelled as art, and projects such as Neurocam, which have no such connection to the art world. Newman implies that the off-site works he is referring too are not flagged as art by mentioning their 'unexpectedness'. While the idea of art projects existing beyond art institutional contexts and labelling is a ripe topic for discussion, it is important to note that such a discussion is somewhat limited by the lack of actual examples. While there have been many art projects executed in non-art settings throughout the course of recent art history – almost all of these projects have been labelled as art forms, with bookings taken in advance (for participatory works), screening/viewing times and textual descriptions with clear reference to authorship.

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<sup>19</sup> Newman, Michael. "The Boundary between Art and Life." (2012). <http://www.scribd.com/doc/93408737/Art-and-Life-Through-Interaction-v2> [accessed 30 September 2012].

Newman cites one example however, Thomas Hirschhorn's off-site work *Swiss-Swiss Democracy*, which was set up in a Swiss Cultural Centre in Paris. Hirschhorn covered the walls and doors of the two-floor Swiss center with multicolored cardboard, decorated with photographs, graffiti, posters, newspaper cuttings and official documents to ridicule democracy in Switzerland and to attack the ultranationalist politician Christoph Blocher, who is now minister for justice and police. Hirschhorn made no attempt to label the project as art, so the audience consisted entirely of people visiting the venue to learn about Swiss culture. Newman claims that this lack of contextualising of the work:

...resulted in there being a much greater likelihood of the visitors interacting more fully with the space, even though they may have had no idea upon opening the door that they were entering a live art project.<sup>20</sup>

Considering that visitors would have initially taken Hirschhorn's highly politicised installation at face value, it is difficult to ascertain at which point they may have suspected that there was another agenda at play. The level of engagement with the work is a somewhat moot point; it is impossible to say whether the audience would have engaged more or less with the content had it been labelled or contextualised as art. This does however raise an important question when considering the nature of such works: Is an art project more engaging to an audience if they think the content they are interacting with is real? The term 'real' here would mean existing in reality not labelled or contextualised as fabrication, fiction or any kind of hoax. Newman proposes that:

Through creating experiences for their viewers, experiences that are vastly different than what most viewers will have ever considered as art before, there will be a questioning of whether what they saw and did was art, or just an extension of life.<sup>21</sup>

Here Newman gets to the core of the issue: If the audience are unwitting participants in art experiences, does this present a framework in which the blurring of the boundaries between art and life becomes the focus of the work? And if so, to what end? Hirschhorn, in discussing

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

*Swiss-Swiss Democracy*, wrote “the most important participation is activity, the participation of reflexion [sic], questioning, making your brain work”.<sup>22</sup> While the idea of active participation and its resultant cognitive associations has been part of participatory art practice for decades, the idea of placing this in a context where the separation between art and life is indistinct is something new. Without getting into a fraught discussion about the definitions of art itself, we can see that the early Dadaist idea of art being subsumed by life is clearly making a renaissance of sorts. It would follow that if audiences are put in the position where they question the distinction between art and life, then the currency of the art event lies in the nature of active experiences rather than passive observations. This idea is evident in Nicholas Bourriaud’s *Relational Aesthetics*, where he proposes a model for artistic practice in which work exists as a social configuration bringing the artist and the public into direct contact with one another. Although Bourriaud’s thesis is widely criticised for its use of examples that fail to exceed their art world context, it is important to distinguish to what extent he supports the art disappearing into life argument. Bourriaud sees the process of creating art as a “social interstice” in which it:

Takes as its theoretical horizon the realm of human interactions and its social context, rather than the assertion of an independent and private symbolic space.<sup>23</sup>

While Bourriaud is suggesting a contemporary model that responds to new possibilities generated by virtual relationships on the Internet, globalisation and a general desire for a more direct interaction between artist and audience, Claire Bishop points out that:

It is important to emphasize, however, that Bourriaud does not regard relational aesthetics to be simply a theory of interactive art. He considers it to be a means of locating contemporary practice within the culture at large: relational art is seen as a direct response to the shift from a goods to a service-based economy.<sup>24</sup>

Locating art within culture at large does not necessarily mean a shift towards art being subsumed by life. Bourriaud seems to be more concerned with changes in the politics of art institutions and cites examples such as Felix Gonzalez-Torres, Jens Haaning, Philippe Parreno

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Bourriaud, Nicolas. *Relational Aesthetics*. France: Les presses du réel, 2002, 8.

<sup>24</sup> Bishop, Claire. *Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics*: Fall, 2004, 10.

and Rirkrit Tiravanija – all of whose work is firmly contextualised within art institutional settings. The participatory elements contained within Bourriaud's examples are mostly concerned with different forms of social interaction that deal with issues regarding public and private space.

If we are to consider why artists would want to explore the idea of this type of practice with a view to actively creating an ambiguity between art and life, we must accept that art still holds meaning – that it seeks to communicate a set of ideas between artist and audience. Unlike the Dadaist agenda, which fell prey to nihilism, this new model for engagement proposes a positive way forward for artists and audiences in which the (more direct) flow of ideas between artist and audience have the potential to strengthen the cultural positioning of art in society. Newman supports this idea by pointing out that:

...the use of chance decreases the artist's biases in the art making, allowing the viewers to speak through their completion of the work. This results in the work being a true reflection of the culture it is produced in and by.<sup>25</sup>

Sociologists Sutherland and Acord expand on this idea by stating that "Meaning-making is not merely a point of orienting towards established conventions, but involves responding to unpredictable encounters in other-oriented ways"<sup>26</sup>. If the separation between art and life is broken down, artists would have access to broader audiences without the constraints of context, bias and exclusivity. To explore this idea in more detail, we must look to the social and cultural implications of unwitting participation in participatory art projects.

The second act focuses on a series of assignments Emmons undertakes as an official 'Neurocam Operative'. He explains to camera that he has been given strict instructions by Neurocam to maintain complete confidentiality regarding the assignments and has decided that documenting these events with a film crew would therefore jeopardise his involvement and the

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<sup>25</sup> Newman, Michael. "The "Why" of Participation-Based Art." (2012). <http://www.scribd.com/doc/93408709/Why-of-Participation> [accessed 25 October 2012].

<sup>26</sup> Lish, Aaron. "Art and Life Through Interaction." (2012). <http://www.scribd.com/doc/93408737/Art-and-Life-Through-Interaction-v2> [accessed 30 November 2012].

investigation. It is decided that using a small hidden spy camera is the solution to this problem. We then cut between footage of Emmons preparing for his assignments and footage taken from the spy camera while he is undertaking the assignments. Some of the details of the assignments are delivered to camera beforehand and other details are narrated retrospectively with voiceover and footage from the actual assignments. During the last two assignments, Emmons meets other Neurocam operatives for the first time and the scope of Neurocam's operations is expanded further. The conclusion of this act sees Emmons participate in an assignment labelled by Neurocam as a 'career advancement opportunity'.

During this part of the film the action becomes increasingly more theatrical as Emmons moves away from enquiry and speculation to partake directly in the experiences set up by Neurocam. At times the assignments put Emmons in situations that are morally, ethically and legally questionable depending on context. To further understand the social and cultural implications of this type of interaction with a lack of art world precedents, we need to broaden the discussion to include pervasive games. Pervasive games are essentially collaborative platforms for engagement that use public spaces in the real world to reveal a narrative that can be altered by participants' ideas or actions. While being primarily a form of interactive play, pervasive games have a lot in common with interactive theatre and live art in the way they engage participants within events often difficult to distinguish from real life. Many of the *Project Neurocam's* participants initially thought that Neurocam was a pervasive game and attempted to 'play' it as such.

One of the common ethical problems inherent within pervasive games is what game designers call 'unaware participation'. This happens when members of the public who have no knowledge of games in progress encounter game elements such as markings and props or have direct contact with players. To those not participating, these types of games are not labelled, advertised or contextualised and are often mistaken for reality. An example is the 2007 Swedish pervasive game *Sanningen om Marika*, which focused on the disappearance of a fictitious character. The game designers created a fictional TV series about the character and website where people could get involved in tracking her down. While nobody ever claimed that the TV



series or the website were real, due to the fact that it was a serious subject aired on national television, many people thought it was real and the project ultimately received much criticism. The general consensus was that trusted public service should never blur reality and fiction in this way, as it was already too common in other media. This opinion implies that 'other media', such as art, has a long history of bending and breaking norms with a disregard for clear-cut ethics. Anthony Julius sums up both sides of the argument:

This leads, from the perspective of the artists, to a certain disrespect of the law, a qualified antinomianism: law has no place in art, there should be no constraints on the imagination. It is the sheer clumsiness of legal investigations in the art world that most exasperate art's champions. From the perspective of moralists, by contrast, an artist deserves no greater licence than any other citizen. Art—or rather, artistic status—excuses nothing. Moralists need not be Platonists. They do not mistrust art; they merely hold that it should not have any special privileges.<sup>27</sup>

If artists are permitted to operate with less regard for societal norms, then how much latitude should they be given? Obviously art that breaks the law or offends people is crossing a line, but where does this line exist if the boundaries between art and life become blurred? One would imagine that this is in fact a kind of safety net, as people do not make these transgressions in their day-to-day lives, so why would this change if art were involved? The problem here lies in the obfuscation of consequences. In a situation where players or participants have been given license to interact in a certain way within what they might see as a 'controlled situation', the rules of engagement can change. An example is the pervasive game *Momentum*, where players mistook a random person for a planted actor. The players were given the task of obtaining a game artefact from an actor playing a homeless person, who was supposed to be found in a public square. After harassing a *real* homeless woman for half an hour and going through her belongings against her will, the players realised their mistake. *Momentum* had set up a boundary-breaking mindset where such behaviour was acceptable in the context of the game, but totally unacceptable in real life. Does *Project Neurocam* similarly set up a space for engagement in which participants adopt a boundary-breaking mindset? Is there any established idea of 'in-game' or 'real-world' contexts necessitating different modes of behaviour? Let us examine a participatory art example to lend further perspective to this issue.

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<sup>27</sup> Julius, Anthony. "The Ethics of Pervasive Gaming." *Pervasive Games, Theory and Design* (2009): 210.

Prior to the creation of *Project Neurocam* in 2004, I was working on a participatory art project entitled *Who Is Robert Henley* in collaboration with artist Peter Burke during 2000. The project involved the creation of two fictitious characters: Robert Henley and Dr Clarence Chan, who engaged in performative role-playing activities within public spaces. The public was invited to participate in the work by taking sides with either Henley or Chan, who were portrayed as archrivals. Participation consisted of plotting with Henley or Chan to sabotage each other's activities. One Friday evening Henley's team met outside Flemington Community Centre with plans to stage an abduction of Dr Chan, who had stolen Henley's briefcase. The abduction was witnessed by members of the public who thought it was real and called the police. *The Herald Sun* wrote an article about the incident, criticising the project for wasting police time, scaring the public and risking violent intervention:

Senior officers fear violence could have erupted if someone intervened in last month's bogus street snatch which happened in front of shocked witnesses in Melbourne's north-west. Girls and their parents at a dance class watched as a young man was grabbed by five people and bundled into a white van near the Flemington Community Centre in Mt Alexander Rd. The horrified witnesses contacted police who, fearing for the safety of the "victim", launched an immediate investigation.<sup>28</sup>

The abduction was intended to take place in a deserted location and was supposed to be filmed. During the heat of the action, participants forgot to bring out their cameras and the level of violence was far more significant than intended. It was not known that the Community Centre would be occupied at the time. During the investigation, a detective asked the question: "How was an abduction that scared the wits out of young girls supposed to be art?" The project was never intended to frighten anybody and was an 'in-game' participatory exercise in which the participants themselves experienced the art. Clearly this kind of practice, if it is to be carried out in the public domain, faces the same set of problems as pervasive games. Unaware participation is always going to be a problem, unless strategies can be developed to accommodate the general public without necessarily compromising the projects. This is contradictory however; as the essence of these types of project is the sense of reality gained from having events play out in the real world, where participants are surrounded by real people

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<sup>28</sup> Butler, Mark. "Police Slam Fake Kidnap " *Herald Sun*, 29 May 2000, 9.

who are unaware of the 'game'. It was hoped that in this situation the process of filming the event would clue the public in on the fact that the abduction was staged, but this argument no longer holds any weight with recent history showing us that criminals have been known to document bad people doing bad things for You Tube posterity. The Flemington example shows us that the blurring of participatory modes of behaviour between 'in game' and 'real world' contexts is a complex and fraught issue that needs to be constantly monitored to ensure that participants or spectators are not harmed.

During the second act of the film Emmons is given an assignment entitled "Covert Surveillance" in which he has to covertly tail a random individual for a continuous duration of 30 minutes. After abandoning his first 'subject', Emmons then chooses to follow a young woman in a bright green t-shirt. When he follows her into a shop and is unable to successfully conceal his intentions, the woman accosts him and yells angrily, "leave me alone because you're fucking creeping me out". In the context of the film, the woman was played by an actress, simulating a possible (albeit rather extreme) response to the situation. The assignment however, was real. While the assumption was made that participants would not expect that Neurocam had provided them with 'plants' to tail, clear instructions were given stating that the objective of the exercise was to follow at a distance and make every effort to go unnoticed. Although this assignment could be seen as ethically and even legally questionable, the unspoken disclaimer was the fact that Neurocam *does not make* anyone do anything they don't feel comfortable with – participation is entirely voluntary. If a participant were to adopt a violent, aggressive or threatening manner while undertaking an assignment, this behavior and its ensuing consequences would be entirely the responsibility of that individual. It is important to note at this point that the fact many of Neurocam's activities are carried out within public spaces does not mean that Neurocam must take responsibility for the actions of every participating individual. Neurocam sets up a framework for engagement, which is entirely benign – none of the assignments have ever requested individuals to partake in any kind of rude, violent or disruptive behaviour. If anyone does engage in such behaviour, one could argue that this supports Newman's proposition of the work being a true reflection of the culture it is operating within. Like with pervasive games,

*Project Neurocam* operates within a socially responsible framework, but is unable to be held accountable for the actions of every individual.

The other component to the discussion about social responsibility is the effect the project has on the individual. While participants choose to engage with the project on an entirely voluntary basis, some of the experiences they have might be seen to be implicating them in difficult or challenging situations. When Emmons is given the 'briefcase assignment', he has to retrieve a card from underneath a phone box and then collect an unknown item from a train station locker. Being based on an actual Neurocam assignment, there were two challenges for participants to overcome in this scenario: Firstly, the retrieval of the card from the phone box involved being verbally harassed by an actor playing the role of an angry junkie, and secondly, gaining possession of the locked silver briefcase from the locker while being watched by a man in a dark suit was designed to create paranoia and uncertainty. While already unsettled by his encounter with the Junkie, Emmons was then put in the position where he had to decide whether or not to take possession of the locked silver briefcase containing contents unknown.

As illustrated in the following scene with Emmons and Williams, the act of taking possession of the briefcase was a way of implicating participants in a scenario where they were forced to question the very nature and consequences of their actions. As pointed out by Emmons, to take the briefcase without not knowing who or what Neurocam was, set up a significant degree of trust. If Neurocam was *not* a benign entity, the case could have contained drugs, a bomb or worse. To put participants in these kinds of situations is highly problematic on an ethical level in that it forces them to believe that they engaging in a *safe* activity – without having any real assurances. Just because an 'organisation' has billboards, a web presence and has been blogged about by thousands, does not guarantee its safety. To an extent the project is self-selecting in this sense; those who might be prone to paranoia or anxiety would pull out at the first sign of potentially threatening activities. Without getting into an extensive discussion on ethics here, the project acknowledged these problematic areas, but sought to push the boundaries of participatory practice by creating a level of engagement that required a significant degree of commitment. As can be seen with Emmon's level of commitment in the film, the

rewards are directly proportionate. It is also necessary to note that with *Project Neurocam*, many of the participants engaged with it as fabrication – even though they were unclear about the exact motivations behind the fabrication. Within this process, the negotiation of ‘in game’ and ‘real-world’ contexts becomes fluid, like with pervasive games. This concept is summed up by game designer Jane McGonigal who claims:

The best pervasive games *do* make you more suspicious, more inquisitive, of your everyday surroundings. A good immersive game will show you game patterns in non-game places; these patterns reveal opportunities for interaction and intervention. The more a player chooses to believe, the more (and more interesting) opportunities are revealed.<sup>29</sup>

As an immersive experience, *Project Neurocam* shares many of the strategies employed by pervasive games, however its significant point of difference is that it does not enlist participants within any specific terms of engagement. With pervasive games, those who sign up are acutely aware that they are engaging with a ludic space. With Neurocam, they must create their own context right from the start. Media arts curator Rudolf Frieling claims that within participatory art practice there has emerged a tradition of non-specific parameters for engagement:

We know what it means to participate in politics or school, and sometimes know what it means to participate in a work of art if we get clear instructions. However there are some projects where it is unclear what exactly is asked of you, or you can only find out by actually doing something. The work requires your input and your act of contribution.<sup>30</sup>

The strategy of creating works that only reveal their content if participants actively engage with them has been adopted by *Project Neurocam* as a key device to encourage participation. During the last scene in the first act, Emmons, after asking Neurocam what exactly Neurocam is (via email), gets a response from Charles Hasting, Neurocam’s director of operations, stating that: “Neurocam is a process of unveiling. Understanding is achieved through experience. Operatives are invited to participate in assignments designed to facilitate this process.”

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<sup>29</sup> McGonigal, Jane. "A Real Little Game: The Performance of Belief in Pervasive Play." In *"Level Up" Conference*, edited by Digital Games Research Association (DiGRA). University of Utrecht, The Netherlands, 2003, 13.

<sup>30</sup> Frieling, Rudolf, "The Art of Participation " <http://blog.sfmoma.org/tag/erwin-wurm> (accessed 28 April 2009).

In spite of Hasting's statement revealing nothing about *what* Neurocam is, it clearly indicates that Neurocam (as an artwork) requires the input and contribution of its participants. Frieling calls these works "open works of art" and claims:

The idea of "the open work of art" goes back to a 1962 book by Umberto Eco, in which he reflects on developments within contemporary art and music where the results of the artwork were not predefined, but rather could change over time, or change by interpretation. He said, in the whole history of art, the act of looking is a kind of interpretation; it's always different and each one of us sees art in a different way.<sup>31</sup>

While still very much contextualised in a gallery context, the idea of the open work of art does not exclude the possibility of making art in a non-art context. To say that 'the act of looking is a kind of interpretation' is somewhat disingenuous as viewers obviously bring the prism of their own experience to any artistic exchange, but the concept of a work with no pre-determined outcomes is aligned with the objectives of a new model for participatory art practice in which the audience are an integral part of creating the work. At its most simplistic level this process can be demonstrated with such works as Erwin Wurm's *One Minute Sculptures*, where the participant's actions and subsequent interpretation of textual instructions on how to create a 'human sculpture' using their own bodies *is* the work. Wurm sets up a framework for engagement – the audience does the rest. Frieling goes on to say that:

...we're interested in ways people can contribute to a work not only by looking—but also by interacting, participating in a group dynamic, or contributing to an artwork. We go, in other words, beyond the viewer.<sup>32</sup>

It is unclear exactly what Frieling is proposing here in terms of going 'beyond the viewer' – perhaps he is referring too the act of elevating the status of the audience to make them key collaborators in the work rather than passive spectators.

During the third and final act of *WTF Is Neurocam* we see the pacing of the film increase. Emmons is awarded a promotion and then given an ongoing assignment where he is tasked

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

with facilitating 'entry-level' assignments for other Neurocam participants. After meeting with a stranger in the middle of the night who offers him a potential lead, Emmons mysteriously opts out of the film, leaving Williams to take over the investigation. In the final scene, Williams meets with Neurocam's director of operations who proceeds to toy with him and reveals nothing conclusive. On leaving the meeting, Williams is accosted by three black balaclava-wearing figures, who tear open his shirt and reveal the hidden camera – holding it up to the lens of another camera they are using to record the event. The film then cuts out as if the tape has been erased.

Ultimately, the film was scripted to raise more questions than it answers – perhaps this is an accurate reflection of Neurocam participation in the context of a new model for participatory art engagement.

## Conclusion

*WTF is Neurocam* shows us a model for engagement in which *Project Neurocam* perpetrates a series of complex theatrical fabrications in order to give participants a series of unexpected, perception-altering experiences. While deliberately masking its content, the project attempts to construct spontaneous, evolving narratives where the participants are a key component of work itself and the role of the artist is continually being redefined by the involvement of the audience. The film is a way of documenting the outcomes of the project, focusing primarily on the social and cultural significance of direct participation in the project, without compromising the work by revealing who or what was behind it.

*WTF Is Neurocam* utilises cinematic techniques adopted from *cinéma vérité*, docudrama and mockumentary to create a film that is not clearly established as fictional, but also does not attempt to conceal the fact that it is a combination of content *based* on real events and footage of real events. *WTF* uses the codes and conventions of documentary as the most effective strategy to convincingly portray what it is like to participate in *Project Neurocam* from the perspective of the project's audience.

The deliberate lack of context afforded by *Project Neurocam* as a participatory art project can be seen as being aligned with the Dadaist desire of art disappearing into life and the creative process becoming subject to the subtle and random nuances of life itself. While the Dadaist manifesto collapsed into Nihilism and vandalism, the core idea of art being subsumed by life has manifested itself in more recent art history as artists are continuing to push the limits of what is considered art by taking art projects to non-art settings. Within this type of practice, an argument is made for the currency of the art event existing in the nature of active experiences rather than passive observations – resulting in a the work being a less biased reflection of the culture it is produced by.



*Project Neurocam* shares many similarities with pervasive games and because it similarly uses real-world platforms as the basis for participant's interactions, it faces the same set of ethical problems with 'unaware participation' and a blurring of the boundaries between 'in-game' and 'real-world' contexts. While *Project Neurocam* makes every attempt to operate within a socially responsible framework, it is unable to accommodate accountability for the actions of every participating individual.

The film demonstrates that *Project Neurocam* requires a high level of commitment in which the content is only revealed by direct and continuous participation. This sets up a means of engagement in which the rewards are directly proportionate to a participants input. This strategy highlights a new model for participatory art practice in which projects are not labelled or contextualised as art, and the work is entirely dependent on the actions of the participants and what they bring to it.

## Literature Review

The participatory art project *Neurocam* is based on the idea of unwitting audience participation as explored by Fowles (1966) who wrote a work of fiction in which the main protagonist's entire reality is gradually subverted by what is presumed to be an elaborate work of theatre in which the relationship between director and audience is redefined and the world itself becomes the stage. This key idea can be traced back to G.K. Chesterton (1905) who wrote a short story about an organisation known as the *Adventure and Romance Society*, who set about perpetrating complex theatrical fabrications in order to give individuals a series of unexpected life-changing experiences.

The issue of how to document *Project Neurocam* draws a comparison between Maling's participatory project *The Vorticist* (2007 – 2009) and July's interactive online project *Learning To Love You More* (2002 – 2009). Maling set up a series of 'appointments' with participants who used spinning tops and tracing paper to create unique drawings while being engaged in conversation around various pre-chosen themes. The appointments and everything that transpired within them made up the work itself, however he meticulously transcribed all of the conversations with hundreds of participants and kept copies of the drawings (participants took home the originals). During 2010, Maling then had a show at Conical gallery where he presented the transcripts of his appointments and the accompanying drawings as an installation. Malings work appeared to exist on two levels; as the interactive appointments, and as the documentation of them in a gallery context. In contrast, July makes documentation of her work the primary focus. She used a central website to engage an audience in undertaking a series of 'assignments' from the website's archives and then uploading their documentation once completed. With over eight thousand people participating over the project's 7-year duration, the site became a vast repository for all of the documentation of the people's assignments. For July, this documentation was the work and her audience did not have to participate in order to view it. Using this strategy for documenting the ways in which people interacted with the work, July created a culture in which people wanted to engage because they could see what other people were bringing to the work. This also enabled a sense of community and a collaborative notion of the work growing and changing over time. An important aspect of this approach is a clear sense of ownership on the part of the audience – an ability to transparently explore the idea of the audience making the work what it is. *Project Neurocam* similarly sets up a context in which audience participation is an integral component of the work itself, but rejects the notion of using its documentation to create another work existing in a presentational context. As a way of communicating the themes of the project in a research context, the alternative strategy of making a documentary film was adopted.

In order to position the film within documentary filmmaking practice, a discussion of documentary film history reveals that the mechanical reproduction of reality is closely linked to the development of modernity, in which the documentary asserts itself as the genre of the objective knowability of the world (Cowie 2007). These early rejections of documentary film's validity were put aside when the avant-garde filmmaking practices of the 1920s led to documentary adopting the narrative codes and conventions of cinema, allowing the language of sensationalism to readily insinuate itself into the protocols of science (Nichols 2001). Documentary had rapidly departed from an objective record of reality to become something that imaginatively reconstructed the look of the world with images, or shots, taken of this world (Nichols 2001). With documentary no longer being constrained to a didactic notion of factual discourse, new forms began to emerge that rejected the binary opposition between fact and fiction. Within the fact-fiction continuum, we began to see the emergence of *cinéma vérité*, Direct Cinema, docudramas, and more recently, mock-documentaries (or mockumentaries). In establishing 5 'modes' of documentary film styles (Poetic, Expository, Observational, Reflexive and Participatory), Nichols draws heavily from the techniques of *Cinéma vérité* and *Direct Cinema* to define the observational and reflexive modes in which the camera moves with the subject/action, allowing viewers to reach their own conclusions. The reflexive mode de-mystifies the process of a film's construction to encourage the viewer to develop a more sophisticated and critical attitude to the content. In contemporary filmmaking practice Nichols' reflexive mode

has become subsumed by the observational mode and is simply known as *observational documentary*.

Roscoe and Hight (2001) claim that mockumentary not only subverts the previously privileged status of documentary as a means of accurately capturing and representing reality, but also suggests a new relationship between audiences and the genre. For them, the appropriation of documentary codes and conventions is used not so much to anchor the argument in the real world or to bolster claims to truth, but rather to offer critical commentary. Roscoe and Hight do not include media hoaxes such as faked April Fool's Day news stories as part of the mockumentary genre, but are careful to define mockumentaries as being limited to *fictional* texts only. They recognise that there are varying degrees of subversion involved in fake documentaries and posit a framework of analysis built on three "degrees" of "moc-docness": parody, critique and hoax, and deconstruction. For Roscoe and Hight, once documentary began to absorb increasingly more modernist strategies such as *détournement*, collage, abstraction and a general rejection of the transparency of realist representation, it began to be seen by early documentarists Grierson and Flaherty as an artistic endeavor, a creative enterprise through which raw material was transformed into meaningful narratives.

To position *Project Neurocam* within an art historical context, it is necessary to examine the notion of art disappearing into life. The idea of eroding the boundaries between art and life was first explored by the Futurists, which was then taken vigorously by the Dadaists who claimed that life is far more interesting than art (Tzara 1922) and that the modern artist does not paint, he creates directly (Clarke 1967). Dada sought to reduce the universal value and cultural importance of art and introduce it into daily life. The Dadaists proposed that by reducing everything to an initial simplicity, the creative process became subject to the subtle and random nuances of life itself. The Dadaist notion of direct creativity was not without its contradictions, as was demonstrated by examining its various inconsistencies and revealing the utopian dream underlying it (Bürger 1984). Furthermore, all of the creative possibilities at the time were dependent on the use of tools, techniques and technology that the Dadaists, according to their manifesto, claimed should be excluded from the creative process. Without access to the means of making work other than self-sacrificial forms of expression, Dada was ultimately condemned to vandalism and nihilism. As Timothy Clark points out, Dada flared up and burnt out as an art sabotaging art in the name of reality and reality in the name of art (Clarke 1967). In spite of Dada's failure to find a way of eroding the boundaries between art and life, they paved the way for further explorations of this idea within art history. American artist Allan Kaprow, who was best known for his pioneering work with experimental artistic events (happenings), claimed that the line between art and life should be kept as fluid, and perhaps indistinct, as possible (Lish 2012).

Once the tradition of eroding the boundaries between art and life had been established within an institutional context, a need arose for artists to push the boundaries of a new kind of artist/audience relationship based on direct experience rather than exchangeable commodities. This new relationship began to seek out ways of exceeding its contextual limitations. Sociologists Sutherland and Acord claimed that knowledge production emerges in the connection between oeuvre and daily life (Sutherland and Acord 2012). It would follow that the boundaries between experience and our reflection and expression of it are always and already blurred and it is simply a matter of politics, or preference on where to draw the line. Meaning-making is not merely a point of orienting towards established conventions, but involves responding to unpredictable encounters in other-oriented ways (Sutherland and Acord 2012). If the separation between art and life is broken down, artists would have access to broader audiences without the constraints of context, bias and exclusivity. To get beyond these contextual limitations, some artists have begun to make work in other real-world contexts. By hosting these art projects, or experiments, "off-site" in unconventional settings, but in settings, which are actually more appropriate to the subject matter at hand, there is a hope that the work will have a stronger effect on the viewer through the work's unexpectedness (Newman 2012). What Newman fails to mention here is the distinction between off-site art projects that are still

labeled as art, and projects such as Neurocam, which have no such connection to the art world. Newman implies that the off-site works he is referring to are not flagged as art by mentioning their 'unexpectedness' and that there is a much greater likelihood of visitors interacting more fully with projects when they have no idea that they are actually art projects. The level of engagement with the work is somewhat of a moot point; it is impossible to say whether the audience would engage more or less with content if it were labelled or contextualised as art. This does however raise an important question when considering the nature of such works: Is an art project more engaging to an audience if they think the content they are interacting with is real? The term 'real' here would mean existing in reality not labelled or contextualised as fabrication, fiction or any kind of hoax. Newman proposes that through creating experiences for their viewers, experiences that are vastly different than what most viewers will have ever considered as art before, there will be a questioning of whether what they saw and did was art, or just an extension of life (Newman 2012). Here Newman gets to the core of the issue: If the audience are unwitting participants in art experiences, does this present a framework in which the blurring of the boundaries between art and life become the focus of the work? Unlike the Dadaist agenda, which fell prey to nihilism, this new model for engagement proposes a positive way forward for artists and audiences in which the (more direct) flow of ideas between artist and audience have the potential to strengthen the cultural positioning of art in society. Newman supports this idea by pointing out that the use of chance decreases the artist's biases in the art making, allowing the viewers to speak through their completion of the work. This results in the work being a true reflection of the culture it is produced in and by (Newman 2012).

The idea of creating a new model for artistic exchange is also evident in Nicholas Bourriaud's *Relational Aesthetics* (2002), where he proposes a strategy for artistic practice in which work exists as a social configuration bringing the artist and the public into direct contact with one another. Although Bourriaud's thesis is widely criticised for its use of examples that fail to exceed their art world context, it is important to distinguish to what extent he supports the art disappearing into life argument. Bourriaud sees the process of creating art as a "social interstice" in which it takes as its theoretical horizon the realm of human interactions and its social context, rather than the assertion of an independent and private symbolic space (Bourriaud 2002). While Bourriaud is suggesting a contemporary model that responds to new possibilities generated by virtual relationships on the Internet, globalisation and a general desire for a more direct interaction between artist and audience, Bishop points out that: It is important to emphasise, however, that Bourriaud does not regard relational aesthetics to be simply a theory of interactive art. He considers it to be a means of locating contemporary practice within the culture at large: relational art is seen as a direct response to the shift from a goods to a service-based economy (Bishop 2004). Locating art within culture at large does not necessarily mean a shift towards art being subsumed by life. Bourriaud seems to be more concerned with changes in the politics of art institutions and cites examples such as Felix Gonzalez-Torres (2001), Jens Haaning (1998), Philippe Parreno (1994) and Rirkrit Tiravanija (1990) – all of whose work is firmly contextualised within art institutional settings. The participatory elements to Bourriaud's examples are mostly concerned with different forms of social interaction that deal with issues regarding public and private space.

When considering the social responsibility of participatory art projects existing outside of institutional settings, Julius (2009) claims that this leads, from the perspective of the artists, to a certain disrespect of the law, a qualified antinomianism: law has no place in art, there should be no constraints on the imagination. It is the sheer clumsiness of legal investigations in the art world that most exasperate art's champions. From the perspective of moralists, by contrast, an artist deserves no greater licence than any other citizen. Art—or rather, artistic status—excuses nothing. Moralists need not be Platonists. They do not mistrust art; they merely hold that it should not have any special privileges. If artists are permitted to operate with less regard for societal norms, then how much latitude should they be given? Obviously art that breaks the law or offends people is crossing a line, but where does this line exist if the boundaries between art and life become blurred? One would imagine that this is in fact a kind of safety net, as people do not make these transgressions in their day-to-day lives, so why would this change if art were involved? The problem here lies in the obfuscation of consequences. In a situation where players or participants have been given license to interact in a certain way within what they

might see as a 'controlled situation', the rules of engagement can change. The blurring of participatory modes of behavior between 'in game' and 'real world' contexts is a complex and fraught issue that needs to be constantly monitored to ensure that participants or spectators are not harmed. Within this process, the negotiation of 'in game' and 'real-world' contexts becomes fluid, like with pervasive games. The best pervasive games *do* make you more suspicious, more inquisitive, of your everyday surroundings. A good immersive game will show you game patterns in non-game places; these patterns reveal opportunities for interaction and intervention. The more a player chooses to believe, the more (and more interesting) opportunities are revealed (McGonigal 2003).

Within participatory art practice, there has emerged a tradition of non-specific parameters for engagement. We know what it means to participate in politics or school, and sometimes know what it means to participate in a work of art if we get clear instructions. However there are some projects where it is unclear what exactly is asked of you, or you can only find out by actually doing something. The work requires your input and your act of contribution (Frieling 2008). The strategy of creating works that only reveal their content if participants actively engage with them has been adopted by *Project Neurocam* as a key device to encourage participation. Frieling calls these works "open works of art" and claims that the idea of "the open work of art" goes back to a 1962 book by Umberto Eco, in which he reflects on developments within contemporary art and music where the results of the artwork were not predefined, but rather could change over time, or change by interpretation. He said, in the whole history of art, the act of looking is a kind of interpretation; it's always different and each one of us sees art in a different way (Frieling 2008). While still very much contextualised in a gallery context, the idea of the open work of art does not exclude the possibility of making art in a non-art context. To say that 'the act of looking is a kind of interpretation' is somewhat disingenuous as viewers obviously bring the prism of their own experience to any artistic exchange, but the concept of a work with no pre-determined outcomes is aligned with the objectives of a new model for participatory art practice in which the audience are an integral part of creating the work. Frieling points out that he is interested in ways people can contribute to a work not only by looking—but also by interacting, participating in a group dynamic, or contributing to an artwork. Going, in other words, beyond the viewer (Frieling 2008). It is unclear exactly what Frieling is proposing here in terms of going 'beyond the viewer' – perhaps he is referring to the act of elevating the status of the audience to make them key collaborators in the work rather than passive spectators.

## **Fictocritical Thesis**

### **Introduction**

The ficto-critical thesis explores the issue of audience interaction as a primary determinant in the making of an artwork. The focus of the research is *Project Neurocam*, an earlier on-line interactive project made by myself.

The main objective of the research is to examine the theoretical questions generated by this project—is it art, where does authorship reside, is it a hoax, what kinds of relationships does it construct? These questions are addressed in the ficto-critical thesis, which is written as an investigative narrative inquiry into how these theoretical considerations relate to how a work is perceived by an audience.

Whilst the original *Project Neurocam* was designed by myself, the fictocritical thesis constitutes a new creative output, which explores the interactive component of the project from the viewpoint of the participant, and explores this perspective through the use of narrative and story telling. The new work represents a clear shift of focus for myself into theoretical examinations of the role of the audience, what they bring to the work and a move into different narrative media.

*Project Neurocam* began with a 2004 billboard campaign, which directed the public to a central website where they were given the opportunity to participate in a participatory artwork that engaged them in a series of interactive ‘assignments’. Since its inception the project has engaged over one million participants worldwide.

The studio-based component of my PhD is a feature length film about Neurocam, which allows the viewer to experience what it would be like to participate directly in the project. All of the content in the film, which is a fictional narrative, is based on Neurocam’s archives. The

structure, style, content and methodology of the film is discussed in detail in the extended exegesis.

The fictocritical thesis draws on an experimental writing style known as Fictocriticism. Cultural theorist Stephen Muecke explains the need for Fictocriticism by quoting Jacques Derrida who once said that “We must invent (a name) for those “critical” inventions which belong to literature while deforming its limits”<sup>1</sup>. Fictocriticism incorporates fiction, theory and criticism into a single body of writing in order to tell a story while making an argument. In this case the story will be the story of Neurocam, from the point of view of an anonymous primary protagonist. The narrative will explore the many complexities of the project from the point of view of the audience, and will draw from an archive of interviews, conversations, blogs, message boards, forums, chat rooms and writing from actual participants. The narrative will also incorporate theoretical references and discourse, which will contextualise the project within the broader framework of contemporary participatory art practice in which the role of artist and spectator is blurred and the actions of participants becomes a key component of the creation of the work. I have chosen to adopt a fictocritical writing style as I feel this is necessary for the reader to understand how the project is experienced by its participants, in order to fully understand and unravel its many complexities. The motivations, aims and objectives of the artist (in this case myself) are rigorously investigated from the point of view of the audience, which allows a greater level of depth when considering the social context of the work.

It is important to note that the primary protagonist of this document is based on a character that is not well versed in the history of art and is not an academic. He subsequently uses relatively plain language to describe his experiences and adopts a research method that draws heavily from the Internet and popular culture, occasionally referencing public databases such as Wikipedia. Whilst I recognise that a traditional PhD exegesis would most likely not reference Wiki pages, in this case it would depart from my fictocritical narrative style if the narrator did not include them to illustrate certain basic definitions for things he has no knowledge of. In these

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<sup>1</sup> Stephen Muecke, "The Fall: Fictocritical Writing," (2002).  
<http://epress.lib.uts.edu.au/research/handle/10453/1344> (accessed 19 June 2008).

instances I have considered including more 'academic' references in the footnotes, but ultimately decided that it would better to place them in the extended exegesis.

The preferred format for this section of the thesis would be a series of dated blog entries posted by the primary protagonist during his time as a Neurocam participant. All references would be hyperlinks to the relevant web pages and additional links to audiovisual documentation would be included. Unfortunately, due to university submission guidelines, this format is unacceptable which is why I have presented a more traditional document.

The purpose of the fictocritical component of the writing is to examine the working methodology of *Project Neurocam* as a live participatory art experience and propose that a new form of interventionist performance art practice is emerging, staged by artists in settings outside the artworld, but entirely sustained and perpetuated via 'audience' participation. The participatory assignments are outlined in detail with theoretical responses from a fictitious participant. The participant is based on Graham Henstock, who was involved with Neurocam during 2004 – 2008 and maintained a meticulous web log. Henstock, like many Neurocam participants, is a person who spends a lot of time on the Internet and has a predisposition towards conspiracy theories, online communities and cultural anomalies. In analysing Neurocam's operational methodology, it is important that the central character acts, behaves and expresses himself in a manner typical of the types of people who interact with Neurocam. Henstock was seen by many as the most influential, dedicated and committed member of the Neurocam community, and with vast archives documenting his Neurocam experiences, is the perfect candidate to base a central character on. Henstock is also referenced in the extended exegesis and appears in the film.



## Chapter 1: Going Down the Rabbit Hole

Something happened during early November 2005 that would change my life forever. Had I known of the tumultuous journey to follow those seemingly innocent events, I can't say whether or not I would have done things differently. Let me start at the beginning.

It was a Thursday night and I was driving home along Alexandra Parade in North Fitzroy. When I stopped for the lights at Smith Street, I noticed a large glowing object in the periphery of my vision. I'm not usually one to pay much attention to billboards, but this was spectacular; a massive, bright orange supersite emblazoned with the words "get out of your mind". A website was featured in much smaller text across the bottom reading [www.neurocam.com](http://www.neurocam.com). The whole affair was further accentuated with a bank of high-powered spotlights, creating the illusion that it was hovering in space above the featureless, darkened building it was mounted on.

I was aware that 'teaser campaigns' were all the rage at the time and gone were the days of didactic product peddling. "Get out of your mind", what did it mean? In the several seconds I was stationary at the lights my mind raced through a series of possibilities. Is it something to do with yoga? A new sexual enhancement drug? New age meditation techniques? As the lights turned green and I moved off, I almost dismissed what I had seen as just another banal attempt by the advertising industry to create intrigue, but "neurocam.com"? That was something I had never heard of before and it did pique my curiosity. It made me think of brain cameras and why a company would choose a name, which so obviously conveyed something firmly entrenched within the realms of science fiction. Unless of course it was something to do with medical imaging technology, but in that case why would they use such an odd slogan? And besides, you don't often see billboards advertising such equipment as MRI scanners and X-ray machines; billboards almost always advertise products or services for the general public. Several minutes later a song I liked came on the radio and I put Neurocam out of my mind.

A week or so later I was at a party and happened to overhear a conversation that immediately sparked my interest. A forty-something balding man and a young woman with multiple facial

piercings were talking about something called Neurocam. As I moved in closer to glean the gist of the conversation, I heard the man say something about a website and 'signing up'. I was about to attempt to join the conversation when someone I knew grabbed my arm and started drunkenly talking at me.

For some reason the combination of seeing the billboard and overhearing the conversation at the party made me want to investigate further. As soon as I got home I googled "get out of your mind". Nothing much turned up there, it seems that it was a slogan used commonly for all kinds of things, ranging from books on healthy eating to all manner of new age philosophies. Next I tried "neurocam.com". Success. The website was very sparse, providing a disappointing lack of information about what in fact Neurocam *is*. Intriguingly, on the 'disclaimer' page, there was featured a long list of all the things Neurocam is *not*:

- neurocam is not a pyramid marketing scam
- neurocam is not a product
- neurocam is not a service
- neurocam is not an Internet dating website
- neurocam is not a new technology
- neurocam is not a marketing campaign
- neurocam is not trying to sell anything
- neurocam is not trying to buy anything
- neurocam is not a cult religion
- neurocam is not a scientific discovery
- neurocam is not a drug
- neurocam is not a new species
- neurocam is not a form of artificial intelligence
- neurocam is not a game
- neurocam is not a social experiment
- neurocam is not a movie or television series
- neurocam is not pornography
- neurocam is not anything to do with neurology
- neurocam is not a new type of camera
- neurocam is not a study
- neurocam is not a psychology experiment
- neurocam is not a terrorist training organisation
- neurocam is not a corporate team-building exercise
- neurocam is not a security company
- neurocam is not anything to do with genetic engineering
- neurocam is not anything to do with genetic manipulation
- neurocam is not a rare disease
- neurocam is not viral marketing
- neurocam is not anything to do with spiral dynamics
- neurocam is not a literary awareness program
- neurocam is not a Rosicrucian order
- neurocam is not influenced by the Thelema
- neurocam is not an initiation process
- neurocam is not an experiment
- neurocam is not confined to cyberspace
- neurocam is not a new age philosophy

neurocam is not the question  
 neurocam is not the answer  
 neurocam is not a new fashion trend  
 neurocam is not an aphrodisiac  
 neurocam is not a self-help workshop  
 neurocam is not a new branch of cognitive science<sup>2</sup>

And so on...

This was followed by an enigmatic quote from Neurocam International's CEO, Ms Bridget Fischer:

Some of the most rewarding experiences we have come about through random circumstances of which we have no real understanding. It is sometimes important to commit to something we know very little about if the act of commitment in itself becomes part of an experience.<sup>3</sup>

Was this some kind of joke? I'd never seen anything like it and for some reason I felt instantly suspicious. The whole idea of 'committing to something I knew very little about' seemed absurd to me, and reminded me vaguely of David Fincher's film "Fight Club"<sup>4</sup> where the main character Tyler Durden gathers together a secret army to participate in "Project Mayhem"<sup>5</sup>, an organised assault on mainstream consumer society. And 'random circumstances'? What was that all about? Were these people insinuating that the act of seeing the billboard, overhearing the conversation about Neurocam and ending up on their site had some kind of hidden meaning to it? And who was this Bridget Fischer and was Neurocam really an international organisation? So many questions and so few answers. The 'experience' thus far was far from rewarding.

The only other content on the website was a contact page with a couple of Neurocam email addresses on it and a registration page. The registration page was giving people the opportunity to apply to join Neurocam by submitting some basic details:

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<sup>2</sup> "Neurocam" <http://www.neurocam.com> (accessed 03 November 2008).

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> David Fincher, "Fight Club" (USA: 1999).

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

1. Your full name, date of birth and preferred operative name
2. Your preferred email address if different from the sender address
3. Your city and country of residence<sup>6</sup>

The phrase 'preferred operative name' was curious. So you could apply to become an 'operative' for an unknown organisation engaging in unknown activities. It seemed absurd on one level, but absolutely intriguing on another. I just couldn't contextualise this in any way, shape or form; there was no precedent whatsoever. I wanted to think that it was some kind of hoax or prank, but that was immediately ruled out because I knew enough about advertising to know that supersite billboards cost about \$15,000 apiece and people just don't spend that kind of money for kicks. Unless of course they have millions at their disposal, which is possible, but it hasn't happened yet. Or has it? During 2003, Hollywood star Ashton Kutcher produced a television series called "Punk'd",<sup>7</sup> which basically consisted of him playing elaborate practical jokes on unsuspecting celebrities.

There was also the fact that Neurocam claimed to be an international organisation, so perhaps they had billboards all over the world costing millions of dollars. I was perplexed, something just didn't add up and I couldn't figure out what it was. I was incredibly tempted to sign up just to see what would happen, but held back as I was worried about my email address being inundated with spam, or being tricked into some tedious equivalent of the Nigerian "419 fraud scam"<sup>8</sup>. The Internet was rife with all manner of dubious activities, and even though I thought Neurocam was something altogether different, I wasn't about to leap in headfirst.

The following day at work I mentioned the enigma of Neurocam to a colleague and she hadn't heard of it. When I mentioned that the frustrating thing about it was that the only way to find out more was to sign up, she gave me one of those looks that cartoon artists often illustrate with a light bulb above the head. "Perhaps it's an ARG, it's got to be an ARG, there's no other explanation," she said. Having no idea what she was talking about, I requested more

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<sup>6</sup> "Neurocam".

<sup>7</sup> Ashton Kutcher, "Punk'd" (USA: 2003).

<sup>8</sup> Administrator, "419 Eater" <http://www.419eater.com/> (accessed 15 January 2009).

information. To those with a limited knowledge of cyberspace like myself, apparently an ARG or Alternate Reality Game is a kind of online game, which revolves around a story. This seemed to make sense, so I jumped on my computer and did some more research. According to game designer and researcher Jane McGonigal:

An ARG is an interactive drama played out online and in real world spaces, taking place over several weeks or months, in which dozens, hundreds, thousands of players come together online, form collaborative social networks, and work together to solve a mystery or problem that would be absolutely impossible to solve alone.<sup>9</sup>

This information was all very interesting to a point, but I needed to know what purpose ARGs served to figure out if Neurocam was one or not. Further digging revealed that most ARGs are free to play as they are funded through their promotional relationships with actual products. “The Beast” was a promotion for Spielberg’s 2001 film “AI”, “I Love Bees” promoted Xbox video game “Halo 2”, “Iris” promoted the release of “Halo 3” and “The Dharma Initiative” promoted the television show “Lost”.

McGonigal uses “I Love Bees” as an example to discuss the positive aspects of a concept called ‘collective intelligence’:

The term ‘collective intelligence’, or CI for short, was originally coined by French philosopher Pierre Levy in 1994 to describe the impact of Internet technologies on the cultural production and consumption of knowledge. Levy argued that because the Internet facilitates a rapid, open and global exchange of data and ideas, over time the network should “mobilize and coordinate the intelligence, experience, skills, wisdom, and imagination of humanity” in new and unexpected ways.<sup>10</sup>

I wasn’t sure that a bunch of people playing online games constituted a radical new way of people working together, but it was an intriguing idea nonetheless.

Not everyone was as excited about the possibilities offered by the Internet and ARGs as

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<sup>9</sup> Jane McGonigal, 2008 “Saving the world through game design: Stories from the near future” *2008 New Yorker Conference*, at <http://www.newyorker.com/online/video/conference/2008/mcgonigal>, (accessed 25 February 2009).

<sup>10</sup> Jane McGonigal, *Why I Love Bees: A Case Study in Collective Intelligence Gaming*, ed. Katie Salen(2008), 1.

McGonigal and Levy. I found a great article by journalist Annalee Newitz who claimed that ARGs are merely a surreptitious form of advertising saying "I feel like the ARG is just a fancier term for guerrilla marketing. Like I said, I don't mind being advertised to, as long as you call an ad an ad—not an ARG."<sup>11</sup> So perhaps it was all just a new way of peddling product on the Internet.

I found myself vaguely disappointed by this, but was still not entirely convinced that Neurocam was in fact an ARG. It seemed that all ARGs made no attempt to disguise the fact that they were interactive online games, whereas Neurocam was simply a total mystery. And if it was advertising a product, service or entertainment form, what on earth was it?

I had to admit to myself that my curiosity was getting the better of me and I knew that there was only one way forward. That night I set up a brand new email address under a false name and submitted Neurocam's application form. Now I would get some answers.

One week later I received the following response from someone named Maxwell Knight:

Dear Applicant

Thank you for expressing interest in Neurocam.

Your application has been forwarded to a designated officer within the Human Resources Security Division so that our organisation can further evaluate your suitability for recruitment.

In the interest of facilitating an expedient assessment, the Human Resources Security Division is currently implementing a series of background checks. We apologise in advance for the potentially intrusive nature of these checks and assure you that Neurocam International only undertakes this course of action in the interest of protecting our proprietary operational

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<sup>11</sup> Annalee Newitz, "The Argument against Args" <http://io9.com/5028054/the-argument-against-args> (accessed 26 August 2008).

procedures. Any information gathered from this historical evaluation will be treated as strictly confidential.

If your application is successful you will be contacted by Mr. Charles Hastings, Head of Neurocam International's Operations Division. Mr. Hastings will further inform you about the nature of the tasks Neurocam requires you to complete.

An unsuccessful application will result in the cessation of all further correspondence between Neurocam and yourself.

Neurocam appreciates that, in 83.6% of instances, new applicants experience a desire to enquire about many issues which may further enlighten them as to the true nature of Neurocam. Due to the need to maintain a high level of operational security, Neurocam is unable to provide much of the information desired by entry level participants.

Thank you once again for expressing interest in Neurocam. I hope that your application will be successful and that I will soon have the pleasure of working with you.

Regards

Maxwell Knight

Head, Human Resources Security Division

Neurocam International



Suitability for recruitment? Background checks? This was starting to seriously freak me out. Suitability for recruitment for what? If I was to become an 'operative' for Neurocam, there was no information whatsoever detailing what my responsibilities would be. And implementing a

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<sup>12</sup> All cited emails from Neurocam displayed in this text are exact copies of archival documents written by Neurocam International.

series of 'potentially intrusive' background checks on me implied that they knew who I was and where I lived. I knew such information could be obtained using IP trace software, but that seemed to be an extreme length to go to. Only the police and certain government departments would have files on your average citizen, which made me wonder if this was something far beyond what I had initially thought. But I kept going back to the idea of it being an elaborate prank, and rejecting it because it just didn't fit. But if it wasn't a prank and it wasn't an ARG, then what was it?

I was also puzzled by the wording of the email, in particular the mention of a "Human Resources and Security Division". This kind of terminology was firmly entrenched within corporate speak, which added further confusion as to why an organisation of such magnitude would exist without any traces beyond billboards and a website. I was reminded of a film called "The Game"<sup>13</sup> directed by David Fincher, which is about a wealthy San Francisco banker who is given a reality altering present from his brother, which results in a series of twists and turns in his life. The film features a shady underground organisation called "Consumer Recreation Services" who facilitate this experience using a massive cast of actors and the co-operation of his family, friends and colleagues in order to give him the experience of a lifetime.

Neurocam certainly had similarities to CRS in terms of secrecy, but now I was completely paranoid. Perhaps this was all an elaborate show staged entirely for my benefit? Did I know anyone wealthy enough to stage such an extensive prank? Did I know anyone who would have enough imagination to even think of it? Once again I was at the mercy of Neurocam, waiting for the results of my application.

During the week that followed, I kept thinking about the fact that I might be being followed or watched by agents of Neurocam. It was a strange experience, which caused me to perceive my actions from a different perspective, as if I was looking down on myself from above.

Exactly one week later I finally got my much-anticipated response from Neurocam regarding my application. It was entirely not what I expected:

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<sup>13</sup> David Fincher, "The Game" (America: 1997).



Dear Applicant

To continue with Neurocam's application process, ALL APPLICANTS are required to complete the following perception-based assessment. An assessment of the applicant's suitability for operational deployment will be made following the fulfillment of these non-negotiable pre-requisites.

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#### APPLICANT PERCEPTION ASSESSMENT NCI-2001/01

##### (A) MISSION

Assess applicant's perception abilities.

##### (B) EXECUTION

1. Write a detailed account of everything that happens between 4pm and 9pm on Monday Nov 15, 2005. Pay particular attention to any occurrence, which may be deemed 'out of the ordinary'. Include in your account two images that represent the best and worst things that happen on Monday Nov 15, 2005.
2. Submit this report via email to [operations@neurocam.com](mailto:operations@neurocam.com) by close of business Friday Nov 20, 2005.

##### (C) OPERATIONAL SECURITY

Not Applicable.

##### (D) GUIDELINES.

As with all Neurocam assignments, you will be assessed on the manner in which you complete this assignment. Intelligence and creativity are traits highly valued by Neurocam and a demonstration of both of these will expedite your further advancement within the organisation. Your application and aptitude in this assignment will be the basis for consideration for operational integration.

ENDS APPLICANT PERCEPTION ASSESSMENT NCI-2001/01

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Regards

Charles Hastings

Head, Operations Division

Neurocam International



Okay, so now the shadowy organisation of unknown origins called Neurocam wanted me to actually spend my time and energy doing something for them, to complete an application to become part of something unknown. This was infuriating! I scanned the text once more looking for clues. A “perception assessment” task which required me to observe and record events transpiring on a particular day, which would allow them to assess my suitability for “operational deployment”. Operational deployment? I already had a job, why would I want another. Would I get paid? I thought about what kind of job would require highly honed perceptual capabilities, intelligence and creativity. I noticed that this email was from Charles Hastings, who was the head of the “Operations Division”, whatever that may be.

I considered the task at hand. Writing an account of events happening during the following Monday between 4pm and 9pm was easy enough, but I was rather alarmed at the idea of “an occurrence deemed out of the ordinary”. Assuming that Neurocam knew who I was and where I lived and worked, did this mean that they were going to stage some kind of event for my benefit? The idea seemed ludicrous, but then the whole thing was completely bizarre. I just couldn’t understand why they would go to the trouble.

I considered the idea that this had something to do with some kind of experimental theatre project. I recalled a book I had read years ago by British Author John Fowles, called “The

Magus”<sup>14</sup>. Fowles tells the story of a central character, Nicholas, who is unwittingly drawn into a series of bizarre incidents which are staged by a mysterious stranger on an isolated Greek island. Nicholas’ entire reality is eventually subverted by what is presumed to be an elaborate work of theatre in which the relationship between director and audience is redefined and the world itself becomes the stage. Was it possible that a theatre group were staging something conceptually similar over forty years later? It was entirely probable that Neurocam was in fact a large-scale work of theatre, which was indeed re-evaluating the traditional divisions between the stage, actors and audience. I could be one of many people interacting in many different ways with this production. I decided that this was my best working theory and resolved to follow Neurocam’s instructions to the letter. After all, it was the only way to find out more about whatever it was they were doing.

The following Monday at 4pm I armed myself with a notebook and a small digital camera. I finished work at around five and was home by six. I made dinner and watched some TV. I didn’t notice anything particularly ‘out of the ordinary’, but I thought that maybe I was looking too hard. During the tram ride home I was hyper aware of everyone around me and it seemed that several of them were staring at me. Or was I staring at them? When I got off the tram I kept checking to see if anyone was following me. When at home I frequently looked out the windows to see if anyone was watching me from a parked car outside. I waited for strange phone calls or a knock at the door. Nothing happened. I paid extra attention to the TV, thinking that perhaps they would try to get a message to me that way, but nothing stood out.

At 9pm I started transcribing the incredibly dull events of the last five hours. I kept worrying that I had failed the test and that Neurocam would reject me, which was totally irrational of course as I didn’t even know exactly why I was doing this in the first place. I was honest in my account of events that transpired, although I considered embellishing the facts to impress them with my ‘creativity’. I took a picture of the perfectly cooked steak I’d had for dinner and the resulting mountain of dirty dishes to represent the ‘best’ and ‘worst’ things of my day. Not particularly imaginative I know. I emailed the report off to Mr Hastings and felt torn between resentment for

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<sup>14</sup> John Fowles, *The Magus* (London: J.Cape, 1966).

being manipulated into the situation in the first place, and gratitude for examining a small slice of my own life in more detail. I laughed at the idea of someone at Neurocam Headquarters sitting down and reading such a boring diary. I wondered if they had thousands of people all over the world doing exactly the same thing.

Over the next week I sporadically googled Neurocam to no avail. I found it incredible that a supersite billboard linking to a website with presumably high traffic would generate no web presence whatsoever. This further fuelled my paranoia that this was a unique experience set up for my own benefit, which I knew was an absurd and highly improbable idea. I patiently waited for the response to my perception assessment assignment. Finally, one week to the hour, things took a turn for the even more bizarre when I received an email from Mr Hastings, who had another task for me:

Dear Applicant

To conclude Neurocam's application process ALL APPLICANTS are required to complete the following assignment:

ASSIGNMENT: NEUROCAM IDENTIFIER - COVERT DELIVERY NCI-3001/02

(A) MISSION

The successful covert and secure collection of a standardised "Neurocam Identifier".

(B) EXECUTION

The secure transfer will be executed as follows. Deviation from operational protocol as outlined will result in instant termination of your involvement with Neurocam.

1. Travel to the secure transfer location (refer to map provided).
2. At this location, carefully camouflaged, there is an electronic safe. Using the map provided, locate that safe.
3. Carefully remove the camouflage.
5. Enter code 159A and open the safe.

6. Take ONLY the package with your Operative ID written on it.
7. Re-secure the safe.
8. Replace camouflage in such a way as to ensure that Neurocam's property remains unable to be easily located by non-Neurocam personnel.
9. Vacate the area.
10. Once in a secure location, open the package.

#### (C) TIMELINE

This assignment must be successfully completed by Friday November 26, 2008.

#### (D) OPERATIONAL SECURITY

The Operations Division appreciates that attendance at a remote locale, based primarily on correspondence and data gathered via telecommunications, is known to raise risk profile issues with respect to standard urban environment factors.

To address potential concerns of operational personnel in this instance, permission is granted to invite a person of your choice to accompany you while executing the mission. Your judgment in this case is being trusted—and, of course, judged. Should you elect to do so, choose a companion that can be trusted not to disclose to any other party Neurocam's operational protocol and proprietary industrial practices.

Please be aware that, for the purpose of additional security and quality control, you may be monitored throughout the completion of this assignment.

Neurocam International is aware that many operatives are tempted to publicly discuss and relate their Neurocam experiences via online forums, web journals and the media. Operatives are strictly not permitted to disclose the details of operational assignments under any circumstances. Any operatives in breach of this protocol will be immediately terminated.

Regards

Charles Hastings

Head, Operations Division

Asia-Pacific Quadrant

Neurocam International

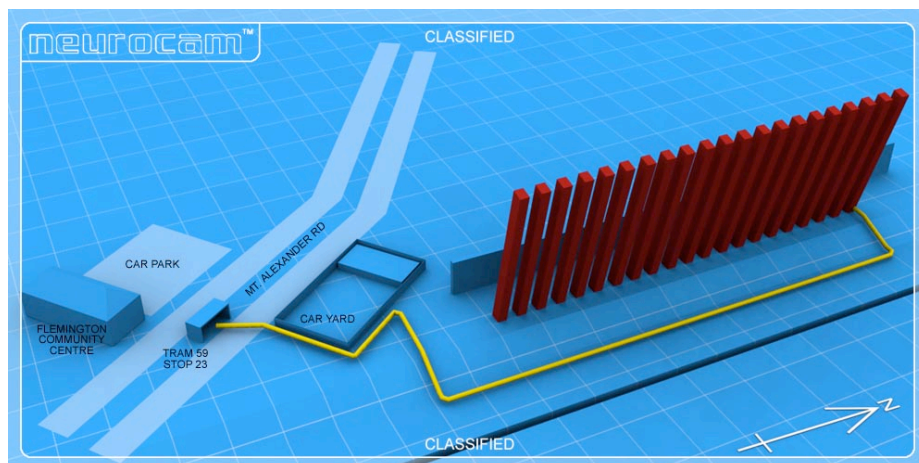


Fig. 1. Map showing location of Neurocam safe from email attachment.

This was now clearly escalating to another level. Neurocam wanted me to travel to a physical location, uncover a hidden electronic safe for which I had the code, and retrieve a “Neurocam Identifier”. The map provided indicated that the ‘safe’ was concealed at the base of the western-most pillar of the large red installation beside the Tullamarine freeway in Flemington. I now felt very suspicious. I considered television programs like “Candid Camera”<sup>15</sup> which lured people into staged situations for the express purpose of catching them on camera doing something embarrassing or entertaining. Was this any different? If I decided to make the trek out to Flemington, what would be waiting for me? I was almost positive that it would not be a concealed electronic safe containing a ‘package’ for me. This was highly unlikely and more than a little bit sinister in a post 9/11 environment. Up until now I had always assumed that these activities were above the law, but this assumption was only based on the fact that Neurocam had enough legitimacy to have billboards and a website. I recalled one item on Neurocam’s website disclaimer; “Neurocam is not a terrorist training organisation”. Were we to blindly accept

<sup>15</sup> Allen Funt, "Candid Camera" (USA: 1948).

these statements as truth because Neurocam said they were true? Was Neurocam engaging in illegal activities like terrorism? Was this concern a result of my exposure to the media's endless talk of terrorist threats, or was it an actual possibility? Terrorists would certainly have enough money to erect billboards, but would they operate in such a blatant fashion?

One of the many things brought up by my 'assignment' was a possible answer to the question of Neurocam's lack of public visibility. In the 'Operational Security' section of Mr Hastings' email there was a direct request for 'operatives' not to talk about their assignments under any circumstances. It was conceivable that if there were many participants involved in whatever this thing was, and if they all wanted to find out more like myself, they would not risk 'immediate termination' by talking about their experiences. It was a unique idea, one that again reminded me of Fincher's film "Fight Club"—"The first rule of Fight Club is do not talk about Fight Club."<sup>16</sup>

But this was Neurocam, not "Project Mayhem". Nonetheless, I was fascinated by the idea that there might be a large number of people doing exactly the same as myself at this precise moment in time. Who were they? There was no question of me not completing the assignment. I'd come this far and I wasn't about to throw in the towel and possibly never get any answers, even if this was some ridiculous new reality TV incarnation of "Candid Camera". If this were the case, at least I'd probably get some kind of prize as well as having a great story to tell. Two days later I decided to go to the location alone. I considered taking a friend along for moral support, but dreaded lengthy explanations about why I was doing this in the first place.

At about 6pm on a balmy Tuesday evening I drove along Mount Alexander Road and parked at a community centre opposite the car yard marked on the map. I skirted around the car yard, down an embankment and under a bridge that took me to a large concrete expanse leading to the red pillars. The scale of them at such close range was impressive and it took me some time to walk all the way to the pillar at the far end. Apart from some kids on skateboards off in the distance, there was no one around. I thought of Neurocam's claim that I might be monitored on this assignment and looked around for surveillance cameras. Nothing stood out.

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<sup>16</sup> David Fincher, "Fight Club"

Once near the base of the pillar I had to climb up through a garden area, which consisted of large grass tussocks amongst wood-chips. At the base of the pillar there was no sign of an electronic safe or a team of people with cameras hiding in the tussocks. I stood there for a while feeling foolish, thinking that this might after all have been someone's idea of a cruel joke. I guess it was possible that pranksters could have money to waste on such activities.

I was just about to leave when I noticed that the wood-chips at the base of the pillar seemed slightly wrong in some way. I knelt down and dug around a bit, finding the edge of what felt like an old bit of carpet. I tugged at it and lifted a squarish section of matting about fifty centimetres wide. When I pulled it right back, spilling the wood-chips everywhere, I saw an electronic safe set in a slab of concrete beneath! It was the most surreal thing—so unlikely, but there it was. Still expecting the “Candid Camera” crew to come running out, I entered the code I had been given into the high-tech looking digital touchpad. There was a small beeping sound, a click and a light flashed from red to green. I lifted the handle of the door and opened it upwards. Inside the surprisingly deep cavity was a pile of yellow envelopes stamped with Neurocam's logo and hermetically sealed in clear plastic wrap. Each envelope had a handwritten name on it, presumably operatives' names. There must have been about one hundred in total. I pulled them all out and sorted through intriguing names like “Tillops”, “Midnight” and “Elhorhanna” until I found one with my own operative name on it. I was very tempted to open someone else's envelope, but worried that I was being watched and this was strictly against Neurocam's instructions. Following my orders, I put all the envelopes back, closed the safe and replaced the matting and wood-chips. I made my way back to my car without seeing anybody or anything unusual.

Once inside my car, which I considered to be a ‘secure location’, I opened the envelope. It contained a typed letter on Neurocam letterhead signed personally by Neurocam's mysterious CEO Bridget Fischer, along with a small orange badge with a strange logo resembling an all seeing eye on it. I read the letter:



Dear Operative [name withheld for privacy purposes]

Welcome to Neurocam!

I am pleased to advise that I hereby offer you a position within Neurocam International.

Your Perception Assignment report was evaluated in accordance with our pre-determined assessment criteria. Neurocam's Human Resources and Security Division found that your report demonstrated a minimum of seven of the ten qualities desired by Neurocam International. This rating determines that you would be an appropriate candidate for operational deployment.

Neurocam International hopes that you will accept this offer and that this act will mark the beginning of a sustained, mutually beneficial association with our organisation. Upon acceptance of our offer you will immediately receive accreditation for ongoing operational deployment, a privilege achieved by less than 26% of applicants.

Your operational deployment will be effective immediately. The details of your first assignment must remain confidential until such time as the Operations Division contacts you. Be aware, the date of your first assignment will be determined by a variety of factors (including, but not limited to, your current location, your age and the state of any current Neurocam operations within your area). Although your deployment is effective immediately, Neurocam cannot guarantee the exact date upon which you will receive your first assignment.

Being part of Neurocam is a responsibility we expect you to take very seriously. Neurocam International highly prizes its strong corporate image and reputation, and your continued involvement with us is conditional upon the demonstration of a public manner which will in no way reflect poorly upon the organisation. Conduct contrary to this condition, such as overt aggression, physical violence, or any similar potentially embarrassing or disruptive behaviour displayed during the completion of assignments, will result in the immediate termination of your involvement with the organisation.

Congratulations on completing Neurocam's application process. I take great pleasure in being the first to welcome you to the Neurocam team.

Regards

Bridget Fischer

CEO

Neurocam International



So this was it, I was now officially part of Neurocam International without having any idea what it actually was.

## Chapter 2: The Briefcase

The first week of my life as an official member of Neurocam passed uneventfully in spite of my mind racing with all the far-fetched possibilities this might entail. Having been informed that my 'operational deployment' would be 'effective immediately', I was ready for action. Recent events had convinced me that Neurocam had some money, substance, and organisation behind them that could not be easily dismissed. In a way Neurocam had already changed my life; it had forced me to consider an altogether different way of looking at my reality and the underlying logic defining everything within it.

This shift in my own perceptions brought to mind the fantastic and elaborate Crop Circle hoax that had occurred in the UK almost 30 years ago. Crop Circles are patterns created by the flattening of crops such as wheat, barley, corn and linseed. Various hypotheses have been offered to explain their formation, ranging from the naturalistic to the paranormal. People believed for years that UFOs created them, until in 1991 two men from Southampton announced that they had conceived the idea as a prank in 1976. Using four-foot planks attached to ropes, they were able to make 12 meter circles in 15 minutes.

I thought that Crop Circles had similarities to Neurocam in that they altered the perceptions of the public by creating mystery, intrigue and speculation. But was Neurocam a hoax? Crop Circles were always intended to make people believe specifically that UFOs had created them, which in retrospect seems like quite an obvious gag. Crop Circles were also very artistic, creating aesthetically beautiful patterns for air travelers to enjoy. If Neurocam was an elaborate hoax like this, what was it supposed to make people believe? So far it simply seemed strange and confusing, as I couldn't contextualise it in any way.

One evening while looking at "Circlemakers", the official Crop Circles website, I came across an interesting article by freelance journalist Jim Schnabel. Schnabel writes about Crop Circles as being an anomaly that changes the way we see things:

Like the descent into an LSD trip, where the filters of ordinary perception are removed and every dew-drop, every phrase, floods the mind with its fulsome infinity, the journey into the heart of an anomaly can teach one the ultimate precariousness of perception. Nothing is what it seems to be—or rather, beyond a few shared basics, everything can be seen as something else.<sup>17</sup>

Schnabel's thoughts about the 'journey into the heart of an anomaly' related acutely to my experiences with Neurocam. The idea of nothing being what it seemed had certainly been central to my journey so far, but why? Why would someone go to all this trouble to teach myself (and possibly others) about the 'ultimate precariousness of perception'? If this was indeed Neurocam's ultimate objective, I found this baffling and more than a little patronising. If I had wanted to explore these issues in the context of my everyday life, I would have embarked on that particular journey already. I felt as if I was being forced into something and that Neurocam had deceived me into signing up for it.

A few days later I received my first real Neurocam assignment:

Neurocam Assignment NCI-4351/01

Critical Information Couriering – Phase 1 – Receipt.

#### (A) MISSION

The secure receipt of an object that contains an object of vital importance to Neurocam International's continued operations in the Asia-Pacific Quadrant.

#### (B) EXECUTION

Below are the procedural details for this assignment. Any deviation from the operational protocol described will result in a requirement of disciplinary action against the operative.

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<sup>17</sup> Jim Schnabel, "Genuine Art" <http://www.circlemakers.org/jim.html> (accessed 19 June 2008).

1. At precisely 3pm on (date withheld for confidentiality reasons), proceed to the corner of Collins Street and Spencer Street where you will find a public phone box. If the phone box is occupied wait until it is vacant.

2. Approach the phone box and pretend that you are making a call. Discreetly reach under the right hand side of the outer shell and locate a small card that will be taped to the underside. This will be the access card for a locker located at Southern Cross Station. You will have until 3.30pm to locate this locker.

3. Making sure you are not being followed, approach the locker, insert the card and remove the contents. Leave the area immediately once the contents are in your possession and deposit them at a secure location of your choosing. You will then be contacted with further instructions.

#### (C) OPERATIONAL SECURITY

Operatives are strictly forbidden from revealing any details pertaining to this assignment. Any operative found doing so will suffer immediate expulsion from Neurocam.

Neurocam rejects accountability for any potentially detrimental consequences arising from the operative's assignment.

#### (D) TIMELINE

Please be aware that the contents of the object are of utmost importance to our organisation and thus the most expedient possible completion of this assignment would be appreciated.

Regards

Charles Hastings

Head, Operations Division

Asia-Pacific Quadrant

## Neurocam International

Far out! So Hastings wanted me to go to a phone box, surreptitiously collect a card hidden underneath the phone, use the card to access a locker at a train station and make off with whatever 'object' was in the locker. I must admit I was incredulous. Part of me was excited about the thought of actually going through with this, while another part of me was extremely cynical. My mind was racing as I considered some of the possibilities this bizarre new task brought to the fore. For one thing, I now had a strange sense of being involved in some kind of narrative revolving around Neurocam as an actual entity engaged in 'operations' within the 'Asia-Pacific Quadrant'. Whether or not this story was real, I was now in a position to interact directly with this narrative if I chose to carry out my assignment.

Thinking about the idea of interacting directly with a narrative construct brought to mind some of the research I'd uncovered when looking into ARGs. Henry Jenkins, Professor of Communication, Journalism and Cinematic Arts, explores the relationship between games and stories, framing his ideas within 'ludology', a field of study focused primarily on games and game play within contemporary culture. He claims that:

Many games do have narrative aspirations. Minimally, they want to tap the emotional residue of previous narrative experiences. Often, they depend on our familiarity with the roles and goals of genre entertainment to orient us to the action, and in many cases, game designers want to create a series of narrative experiences for the player.<sup>18</sup>

Until now, I had discounted the idea of Neurocam being an ARG due to its lack of connection with any kind of product, service, entertainment media or advertising strategy. What Jenkins was saying made me re-evaluate this position in light of recent events. If game designers are wanting to create a series of narrative experiences for the player and are using a combination of online and offline environments, then it was conceivable that Neurocam may be some new form of ARG which relied on a more subtle form of interaction with its participants. Certainly my own familiarity with film and television led to a particular interpretation of my latest assignment; an interpretation based around thrillers about secret agents, nefarious underground activities and

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<sup>18</sup> Henry Jenkins, "Game Design as Narrative Architecture " in *First Person : New Media as Story, Performance, and Game* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2004), 2.

paranoia. If my experience of this genre was steering me towards the action, I wondered what form the action would take. I had to remind myself that spy thrillers were works of fiction and I was just an ordinary person encountering some very weird shit. I hoped that these unusual events were in fact connected with some prototype for a new type of game. If this was the case it would give me a framework to better understand it. As Jenkins puts it, "Game designers don't simply tell stories; they design worlds and sculpt spaces."<sup>19</sup> Hopefully I was entering a constructed world.

In the context of his discussion about the relationship of games and narrative, Jenkins quotes game designer Ernest Adams who makes a good point about the process of storytelling:

In its richest form, storytelling -- narrative -- means the reader's surrender to the author. The author takes the reader by the hand and leads him into the world of his imagination.<sup>20</sup>

If I was part of an experience authored by someone else, to what extent was I prepared to surrender myself to someone else's imagination? This idea was all well and good in the context of reading a good book on the sofa, but in this new context of ARGs, it seemed like a huge leap of faith. In a situation where the game was widely known as being produced by a reputable production company it was about as risky as watching TV, but in a situation where the authors of the experience were unknown, it could be seen as a foolish risk. At the same time, I agreed with Jenkins' point that the best experiences of storytelling do involve suspending rational disbelief and giving oneself over completely to the imagination of the author. If I was to continue with this experience, I had to trust that Neurocam's creators had good intentions in mind; that they were doing this for the benefit of an audience. Giving myself over to their plan required a significant degree of commitment, and usually we only commit to things when we have a clear understanding of exactly what they mean to us. In this case, the single most powerful motivating factor was still the mystery of it all, and I found it interesting that this related beautifully to one of the central narrative devices of the thriller genre.

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 3-4.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 3.

Another concern I had about this assignment was Neurocam's disclaimer in the 'operational security' section of the brief that read, "Neurocam rejects accountability for any potentially detrimental consequences arising from the operative's assignment." So they appeared to be covering their own arses in terms of public liability. So if I did this thing I was on my own. I wondered what would happen if I were run over by a tram and broke my leg while on the assignment. Clearly Neurocam wouldn't be paying for my medical bills and loss of income, but then why should they? I was participating in whatever this was entirely of my own volition, if anything happened to me it was ultimately my own fault. I thought of other ARGs and recalled that none of them had disclaimers denouncing liability, but doubted that their insurance would cover any incidents arising from participants engaging in real-world activities. But what did Neurocam mean by 'potentially detrimental consequences'? Were they trying to scare me? Was this a test?

Four days later I found myself lurking outside a phone box waiting for some junkie to finish yelling rabidly into the phone and give me a chance to get what I needed. As the long minutes wore on I became convinced that the junkie was in fact an actor working for Neurocam, trying to subvert my assignment. As he continued his abusive ranting I became anxious that my deadline was rapidly approaching. My window of opportunity apparently closed at 3.30pm and I still had to walk to the train station and find the locker in less than twenty minutes. At 3.15pm the junkie in the phone box swore loudly, smashed the receiver against the wall of the booth and hurriedly shuffled off down the street. Darting for the booth I hastily made the pretence of making a phone call with one hand, while groping around under the unit for the card. After feeling around several solid lumps of what felt like old chewing gum, I located a thin paper card, much the size of a tram ticket. The card was attached using some sticky substance like blue-tack, and I was careful to remove it without doing any damage. Sure enough it was a ticket for locker number 068 at Southern Cross Station. Alarming, the expiry time on it was 3.30pm that day.

Sprinting across the road to the station I wished I had done some prior research into the location of the lockers. With less than ten minutes to go I located one bank of lockers and



discovered that they were numbered 1–50. I frantically ran off in search of more lockers or somewhere to get some information. To make matters worse, some of the station was undergoing reconstruction so I was diverted through large plywood tunnels. Running madly all around the station dodging angry commuters I finally located another set of lockers at the far end. Thanks Neurocam. With three minutes to spare I found locker 068 and quickly inserted the card. A message on the LCD screen gave me the option of unlocking the door or extending the time. The urgency of the situation and some innate desire to successfully complete what I had begun inhibited any rational thought at this point. Hastily unlocking the door I reached in to grab whatever object was inside. The object turned out to be a very expensive-looking aluminium briefcase.

The briefcase had a combination lock and seemed to contain something weighing a couple of kilos inside. It didn't rattle so the contents must have been well secured. For an extremely paranoid instant I thought of the possibility that this situation may not have anything to do with new types of ARGs and that I might be just be some poor shmo tricked into smuggling a briefcase full of cocaine out of a train station. I could just imagine trying to explain my Neurocam involvement to the drug squad. As I stood there staring dumbly at the briefcase in my hand I noticed someone watching me from a departure platform about twenty meters away. A tallish man in his mid-thirties wearing a well-cut dark suit was standing on the platform staring directly at me. For some reason, possibly due to my paranoia about having in my possession an item containing potentially dubious contents, the man staring at me completely unnerved me. I hurried out of the station, frequently glancing behind me to see if I was being followed. At this point I must admit that I really was starting to feel like a character in a movie. Whatever this was, I had been subtly manipulated into a situation where I was now complicit in a real life scenario with real consequences. One again, I found myself having to blindly trust Neurocam's intentions as I carried out exactly what they had asked of me.

Once back in the safety of my apartment, I studied the briefcase in more detail. It had three combination wheels, each numbering one to nine. I googled combination locks and found a page which claimed that with the three wheel style locks there were actually only 999 possible

combinations, one of which would be correct. I thought about how long it would take to wind the wheels around in 999 configurations and started to test it out. Progress would be tedious as it would require ticking off each combination on a bit of paper—this would take quite a while. Giving up on this plan, I inspected the casing and thought about levering it open. It was possible, but would undoubtedly damage the briefcase beyond repair. But what was I doing? Neurocam had not asked me to open it, they had simply asked me to retrieve it from the station, keep it safe and await further instructions. I was in two minds; if this was some kind of game where I was part of a narrative experience, was I supposed to disobey my instructions and open the case anyway? Were the contents a clue for the next part of my story? Was this a test to see whether or not I played by their rules? At a loss for how to proceed I put the briefcase back on the table and did some more research on ARGs.

One of the first ARGs to emerge on a massive scale was “The Beast” which was created by a team at Microsoft to promote Steven Spielberg’s film “AI” back in 2001. Human Rights and Internet Specialist Barry Joseph writes about his experiences while playing “The Beast” and reports some alarming findings:

Last week, waking in a dreamy haze, I refused to answer a 4 a.m. series of phone calls. Afterwards, unable to sleep, my thoughts revolved around the absurd possibility which entered both my mind and that of my fiancé beside me: “Was that the game?” The game has become an entity in my life, an entity who sends me emails, who hacks web sites, who phones my loved ones. My best friend received a call at work, on his cell phone, as he was preparing to head home for the day. After addressing him by name, the computer voice warned: “They found out about Jeanine! Get out of the building... fast!” Perhaps “game” is misleading. Clearly, it must be considered a promotion, as it’s designed to advertise the upcoming Spielberg film about artificial intelligence. But for a generation brought up on role playing games and computer adventures, the line between a game and a story has been blurred beyond recognition and, in the case of this one, its telling is beyond anything previously encountered.<sup>21</sup>

I wasn’t entirely sure that I believed Joseph’s account as it could have been just hype, but apparently he had an experience where he *knew* that he was playing a game, but still found himself in a position where reality and fiction became confused. He attributed this largely to the method of storytelling the game used; the way it encroached upon his daily life and people around him. I considered the fact that this was one of the first ARGs of its kind and thought that

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<sup>21</sup> Barry Joseph, “When the Medium Is the Message ”  
<http://cloudmakers.org/editorials/bjoseph525.shtml> (accessed 27 May 2008).

back in 2001 it really would have been an entirely new experience for participants, one that had the ability to ride the line between fabrication and fact. But I kept coming back to the same thing. *It was a game.* If Joseph knew that he was playing a new type of game with some unpredictable elements, how could he possibly become confused about what was real?

I thought of a sinister proposition: Neurocam was doing exactly the same thing as “The Beast”, but *not* telling anyone that it was a game. The fact that “The Beast” was promoting “AI” had been withheld from the public until the game’s conclusion (a common device used in advertising these days), so why couldn’t a similar ARG withhold the very fact that it was actually a game? Perhaps the latest thing in ARGs was to make them more immersive by not defining or contextualising them in *any* way, and unleashing them on an unsuspecting public. My mind boggled at the ethical implications of this, but I was reminded that if production companies can get away with creating participatory experiences like “Big Brother”, then anything’s possible. But what if I didn’t want to play? I guess I was the only one forcing myself to do this.

Joseph also talks about the use of the Internet in these kinds of games and how it plays a key role in identity by stating “These communication tools not only enhance who we are, but they may also define who we are as well, shaping us into something new.”<sup>22</sup>

The experience I was having was facilitated largely through the Internet, and I suppose that it could have been said that my ‘story’ and my ‘role’ was being constructed via an anonymous series of email addresses. The key elements of my experience were possibly fabricated and written into a participatory narrative, which was slowly being fed to me in the form of emails from Charles Hastings, Head of the Operations Division at Neurocam International. But was this defining or shaping who I was? Certainly it had an impact on my life right now, but I wasn’t sure that a few emails were potent enough to change the way I saw things. In a sense the Internet does play an important role in identity in an interactive game context as it allows us the freedom to reinvent ourselves. I had already chosen an ‘operative alias’ and was able to interact with Neurocam in whatever way I chose. The fact that I had so far chosen to play by their rules and

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

simply follow their instructions did not mean that I couldn't adopt some new strategy where I began to fabricate elements of my own character. Maybe this was what Neurocam wanted, for me to play them at their own game.

So many online games these days were concerned with creating a space for interaction where participants were able to shape themselves into some kind of fantasy character, which could be seen as what Joseph dubs an 'enhancement'. "The Sims"<sup>23</sup> and "Second Life"<sup>24</sup> both explore the theme of virtual worlds where one can create a character and interact in a virtual space with other players. Having indulged in "Second Life" I had observed a less-than intellectually stimulating experience where horny teenage guys who were trying to chat up girls mostly populated this wonderfully adaptable virtual world where we could do anything. The novelty of being able to grow a tail, fly or walk underwater without drowning wore off rather quickly after witnessing how other participants spent (or wasted) their time in the game. It seemed that giving too much control over to the masses to write their own scripts led to exposing the inevitable flaws (and lack of creativity) within the human condition. Taking on the idea of Neurocam being interactive in a broader sense where I may have had some power and control, I decided to send Mr Hastings an email asking him *what* Neurocam was. I wondered why I hadn't thought to ask this before.

The next day I got a reply from Hastings:

Dear Operative (name withheld for security reasons)

Neurocam is a process of unveiling. Understanding is achieved through experience. Operatives are invited to participate in assignments designed to facilitate this process. Neurocam is not a marketing ploy, nor does it have any political or religious affiliations. Beyond this, the onus is on the operative to either achieve understanding or to pursue whatever investigative trajectories

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<sup>23</sup> Bill Wright, "The Sims," 2000

<sup>24</sup> Linden Lab, "Second Life," 2003

they deem appropriate. Be warned, however, that the latter invariably leads to mystification and frustration.

Regards

Charles Hastings

Somehow this was not the response I had hoped for. I had expected something playful and interactive, but Hastings was basically warning me off trying to find out too much about them. So it was a process of unveiling. Unveiling of what? This was bordering on mystical and had to be a joke. Apparently the experiences I would have while carrying out my assignments would teach me something about the true nature of Neurocam. What did this actually mean? I wanted to be entertained; to be part of some new game where I could make up my own rules, not be patronised by some unknown person hiding safely behind their computer. I had to concede that my immediate response to Hastings' terse email was probably the result of my exposure to entertainment genres where rewards were immediate and readily accessible. Going back to Joseph's experiences of "The Beast", it seemed obvious that these new types of games expected far more input from their players than the previous crop of interactive virtual world porn. In my case, it was clear that Neurocam wanted me to play by their rules every step of the way.

One week later I received another email from Hastings about the briefcase that lay unopened on my coffee table:

Neurocam Assignment NCI-4351/02

Critical Information Couriering – Phase 2 – Delivery.

(A) MISSION

The secure delivery of a briefcase that contains an object of vital importance to Neurocam International's continued operations in the Asia-Pacific Quadrant.

#### (B) EXECUTION

Below are the procedural details for this assignment. Any deviation from the operational protocol described will result in a requirement of disciplinary action against the operative.

1. You are required to contact operative (name withheld for security reasons) via the following e-mail address (email address withheld for security reasons).
2. Arrange a mutually convenient place and time for transfer of the briefcase you have in your possession. During your correspondence DO NOT reveal the exact nature of the briefcase. At all times refer to the briefcase as 'a parcel'.
3. Upon delivery of the briefcase, you are required to obtain evidence of the transfer. This evidence must be provided in at least one of the following forms—photographic, audio-visual, audio, retinal scan, bio-metric authentication, fingerprint imprint or any alternate form of definitive evidence you are able to procure.
4. Submit a report of the transfer to the Operations Division (operations@neurocam.com) with transfer evidence attached.

#### (C) OPERATIONAL SECURITY

In the interest of assuring the safety of operative (name withheld for security reasons) it is essential that all operatives BCC all correspondence to Neurocam International's Operations Division (operations@neurocam.com). If this does not occur, Neurocam rejects accountability for any potentially detrimental consequences arising from the operative's encounter. In addition, although the final location of the meeting is entirely at the discretion of the operatives, Neurocam International strongly recommends that the exchange take place in a heavily populated area, so as to further ensure the safety of both operatives.

#### (D) TIMELINE

Neurocam International respects the potential difficulty of arranging a mutually convenient meeting time and so does not place a strict deadline upon this assignment. Please be aware,

however, that the contents of the parcel are of utmost importance to our organisation and thus the most expedient possible completion of this assignment would be appreciated.

Regards

Charles Hastings

Head, Operations Division

Asia-Pacific Quadrant

Neurocam International



This was most interesting. I was about to meet another Neurocam operative and hand over the briefcase to them. I wondered if this person would be an unsuspecting participant like myself, or someone behind the curtain who knew everything and would be secretly observing or testing me. Would the exchange be covertly recorded and played on some website? The possibilities were vast, but I was excited. I felt like the game was being taken to yet another level.

Hastings asking me for evidence that the exchange had taken place intrigued me. This added what I thought was a very game-like element to the narrative. It was possible that my documentation of the exchange would end up on some central website along with material handed in from many other participants. I had noticed that most ARGs had central web hubs that were often updated in real time as participants completed various tasks. Neurocam's main site was obviously not used for this purpose, but they could have had another site under a different name somewhere else on the net. I thought that this possibility would add another interesting layer to the game—a situation where the audience were divided into two camps—unsuspecting participants like myself and observers who could log on to the website and see everything as it unfolded. Perhaps this was to be my future unveiling—access to the bigger picture where I got to witness new rats in the maze.

I sent off an email to my Neurocam contact informing them that I had a 'parcel for them and that

we had to arrange a time to meet. While I was waiting for a response I came across an interesting new ARG that everyone (online) was talking about called “SFZero”.

“SFZero” was the creation of Ian Kizu-Blair, Sam Lavigne and Sean Mahan of Playtime, a nonprofit organisation dedicated to producing free immersive art games that use new technologies in interesting ways. “SFZero” initially appeared to contain all of the hallmarks of a typical ARG, but was labeled as a ‘collaborative production game’. On closer inspection, “SFZero” had some rather subversive features that set it apart from other ARGs. Rather than superimposing an alternate game world narrative over the real world, it asked players to create their own tasks, which were then performed by other players in the real world. In an online review of the game, creative director Adam Simon of gaming start-up “Socialbomb” writes that “SFZero asks players to recontextualise the real world as a game world, where anything and everything may be pulled into play at will.”<sup>25</sup> After all of my research so far this seemed to be the best lead as to how Neurocam operated. If Neurocam was a type of game, then it was very similar to “SFZero” in that it seemed to bring in elements from the real world as a kind of blurring of the boundaries between reality and the game world.

I thought about the implications of a situation where players were able to treat the real world as a game world and impose their own rules. Surely this would result in chaos? Possibly not if the game’s designers had set up the parameters of engagement in such a way that participants adhered intelligently to central thematic elements. Looking at the game’s website, it was obvious that the tasks created by players attempted to focus on creativity, exploration, community, and performance. I found the results posted by the players a little disappointing however, with such entries as deporting non-native plants, tipping in a non-tipping industry, putting flags on the top of buildings, staging impromptu drive-in movies, fabricating urban legends and kidnapping other players for three days.

A term I had come across often in researching these types of games was ‘the magic circle’. This

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<sup>25</sup> Simon Adam, "Fictive until Proven Otherwise: Sfzero and the Boundless Magic Circle" <http://www.prophecyboy.com/itp/biggames/fictive-until-proven-otherwise-sfzero-and-the-boundless-magic-circle/> (accessed 20 May 2009).



apparently referred to the establishing of boundaries between the game world and the real world in order to define the parameters of engagement. Simon Adam observes that:

SFZero takes the concept of a flexible magic circle one step further by placing control over its boundaries in the hands of each individual player. It properly describes itself as an “interface” - a different way to view and interact with the world - one controlled by the player, not by the architects of the game. This represents a profound shift from the traditional ARG framework, in which the game designers decide what real-world elements are part of the game, to one in which the players decide which real-world elements will be drawn inside.<sup>26</sup>

If games like “SFZero” were now incorporating real world elements at the whim of the actual players, did this suggest a new precedent in which participants’ experiences could be altered by other people’s actions in a more fluid way? From the examples I had seen of “SFZero’s” ‘assignments’, real world interactions had been limited to largely mundane and innocuous material, but this did not mean that far more devious and complex tasks couldn’t be carried out. I thought of the kidnapping assignment and wondered if the recipients of this experience knew that they were being gamed by competing players. On reflection, it was entirely within the realms of possibility that my Neurocam experiences were the result of some enthusiastic “SFZero”-like gamer trying to score points for their creativity.

Later that day I received a reply from my ‘contact’, who was keen to make the exchange. We agreed to meet at Federation Square at 1pm the next day. This seemed to satisfy Neurocam’s criteria of a safe and well-populated area. As we both described our appearance and what we would be wearing, I thought to myself that this felt like going on a blind date.

The next day I felt more than a little conspicuous walking through the busy lunch crowds with a shiny silver briefcase about to meet a complete stranger. When I got to the arranged spot, there was nobody resembling an operative (name withheld for confidentiality reasons) around. I waited self-consciously for several minutes until a bespectacled woman in her mid-forties wearing nondescript corporate attire came confidently striding through the crowd.

“Are you operative (name withheld for confidentiality reasons)?” she asked.

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

"Yes, are you operative (name withheld for confidentiality reasons)?" I returned feeling very foolish indeed.

She nodded and I handed her the briefcase mumbling, "This is for you..."

She took the briefcase and gave it a cursory inspection. What had Neurocam told her to look for? Was she checking to see if I had attempted to force it open?

"Um, do you mind if I take a photo?" I asked, pulling out my phone.

"Sure," she replied. She was expecting this.

I took a snap of operative (name withheld for confidentiality reasons), a short woman in her mid-forties wearing a navy blue business suit, holding the briefcase. She looked like she had just stepped out of a corporate environment.

"Done?" She asked curtly, obviously anxious to leave.

"Yep. Um, thanks." I stammered as she gave me a small nod and walked briskly off into the crowd.

As I walked back to the tram stop it occurred to me that I still had no idea what was inside the briefcase.

### Chapter 3: Covert Surveillance

Following the odd briefcase incident I dutifully wrote up my report as requested by Mr Hastings. It felt very strange to be putting in this much effort for something I wasn't being paid for that had no obvious rewards, but too much had happened for me to simply walk away now. Whatever narrative hook Neurocam was using seemed to be working on me. Part of me felt strangely flattered that so much time and energy had been spent by the perpetrators of this experience purely for my benefit, which was why I felt motivated to continue. I also now had a sense of belonging to something, in spite of the anonymous nature of whatever it was. If this was a new type of game set up by persons unknown, I was happy to play along with them and see where it led. I wasn't really expecting a response to my report and was quite surprised when Hastings promptly wrote back with the following:

Dear Operative (name withheld for confidentiality reasons)

Your report for Neurocam Assignment NCI-4351/02 has been received and filed. Neurocam International's Operations Division is currently reviewing your report. Your performance will soon be assessed in accordance with our operational criteria. The results of this assessment will be noted on your file.

Neurocam International appreciates the unorthodox nature of this assignment and your willingness to continue your association with the organisation despite this unusual request.

You will receive the details of your next assignment within 8–10 working days.

Regards

Charles Hastings

Head, Operations Division

Neurocam International

Not exactly a highly personalised note of gratitude and encouragement. So Neurocam were keeping a file on me, and assessing my performance in accordance to their operational criteria. Not knowing what their operational criteria was made this statement a little meaningless, but nonetheless it was interesting to know that I was being tested in some way. I appreciated Hastings' acknowledgment of the unorthodox nature of the assignment and my willingness to continue, although the general tone was so detached and impersonal that I couldn't imagine ever being able to have a beer down at the pub with him. The email seemed to be so generic that I wondered if perhaps it was a form letter that had been sent out to many people in response to many different assignments. I was excited to think that there could be a vast number of assignments in store, all of which were unorthodox in nature.

In considering that there was a strong possibility that I wasn't the only one running around doing crazy things for Neurocam, I still didn't understand why I hadn't heard anything about this 'game' or whatever it was via the media or the Internet. Although I could see why participation necessitated an element of mystery, it didn't make sense that other participants wouldn't at least blog or tweet about their experiences. Neurocam did make it clear that they wanted us to maintain total secrecy in regard to our involvement, but I found it hard to believe that someone hadn't spilled the beans. I wasn't exactly sure what Neurocam's policy on telling friends and family about our involvement was, so I decided to email Hastings and ask him. His reply was more than a little disturbing:

Dear Operative (name withheld for confidentiality reasons)

In the Operational Security section of your assignments please note the following information: operatives are strictly forbidden from revealing any details pertaining to this assignment. If you wish to continue your involvement with our organisation absolute discretion is paramount. Operatives may not divulge any information about their assignments or affiliation with the organisation to anyone. Partners, family, friends and colleagues are no exception. Any operatives found to be in breach of this contractual agreement will be terminated immediately

and removed from our database. If you do not agree to these terms and conditions you must cease your involvement with us immediately.

Regards

Charles Hastings

Head, Operations Division

Neurocam International

Once again I was reminded of Fincher's film "Fight Club" and Tyler Durden's non-negotiable request that all members of the club were unable to mention their subversive activities to anyone under any circumstances. At the conclusion of the film it became clear that Durden's subversive agenda (blowing up credit card company buildings) was something that could only be orchestrated with total secrecy. It was an interesting angle, especially in the context of a game like Neurocam that was quite possibly involving many players. Surely it was some kind of test to see how committed we were to the game; to see if we were prepared to go the extra mile. Creating a scenario where we were expected to keep secrets from partners was extreme; I imagined a hypothetical scenario where a husband might think his wife was cheating on him when she lied about her whereabouts while out on an assignment. Fortunately I didn't have to face this dilemma as I was single and rarely saw my family who lived in another country. I wondered what I would do if I were in a relationship, whether or not I would be prepared to keep secrets from and lie to a partner. I thought about the odd-looking couple at the party a few weeks back who seemed to be talking publicly about Neurocam. How would Neurocam know if we were being indiscreet? Obviously to post information on blogs, Facebook or Twitter would be easily picked up, but to have conversations with people at parties or in the privacy of one's own home? The idea of Neurocam having a team of people who were constantly following us and bugging our homes and work places to ensure we maintained absolute discretion was totally far-fetched. Unless of course Neurocam was operating on a multi-million dollar budget and had no respect for our privacy. I was sure that I hadn't seen anything in our 'contract' about waiving our rights to privacy, but I hadn't looked that closely. I wondered if Neurocam was making me

into a more secretive type of person.

That night I rented Fincher's earlier film "The Game", which I had seen before, but wanted to examine in more detail after my latest Neurocam dealings. I couldn't stop thinking about the wider implications of a game-like situation that attempted to encompass one's entire reality as well as demand complete loyalty and secrecy. In "The Game", the CRS were a massive and well-funded organisation with enough money, connections and power to completely subvert a subscriber's day-to-day life experiences. It was all an elaborate theatre of course, but one that was certainly possible with enough planning and resources. So why was this idea constrained to the world of fiction? Surely Fincher had proved with his film that this idea was not only achievable, but that there would be a demand for this type of practice. Extremely wealthy people who wanted the 'ultimate experience' would surely pay good money to have a team of experts manufacture an alternate reality adventure based around their most extravagant and outrageous desires. The key to Fincher's concept was that these adventures happened unexpectedly, with unpredictable outcomes. If participants signed up for an experience knowing exactly what would happen when, the effectiveness of the exercise would be lost.

The idea of a type of recreational reality altering experience could be traced back further in film and television history with Gene Levitt's 1978 TV series "Fantasy Island"<sup>27</sup>, which I had watched religiously as a teenager. In "Fantasy Island" people from all walks of life could pay to visit a mysterious island in the Pacific where the enigmatic host Mr Roarke would orchestrate elaborate works of theater, which enabled them to live out their fantasies. As with "The Game", the core elements of these scenarios occurred in such a way that they would always take participants by surprise. And like John Fowles' 1966 novel "The Magus", the experiences would always teach participants something about themselves.

Fascinated by the origins of such radical ideas I googled "The Game" and "Fantasy Island" to see if they were based on any literary precedents. Sure enough Wikipedia mentioned that in Fincher's script for "The Game", the whole idea of Consumer Recreation Services was derived

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<sup>27</sup> Earl Bellamy, "Fantasy Island," in *Fantasy Island*, ed. Gene Levitt (USA: 1978).

from GK Chesterton's 1905 novel "The Club of Queer Trades" where he writes about a similar organisation he calls the "Adventure and Romance Agency". Chesterton writes:

The Adventure and Romance Agency has been started to meet a great modern desire. On every side, in conversation and in literature, we hear of the desire for a larger theatre of events for something to waylay us and lead us splendidly astray. Now the man who feels this desire for a varied life pays a yearly or a quarterly sum to the Adventure and Romance Agency; in return, the Adventure and Romance Agency undertakes to surround him with startling and weird events. As a man is leaving his front door, an excited sweep approaches him and assures him of a plot against his life; he gets into a cab, and is driven to an opium den; he receives a mysterious telegram or a dramatic visit, and is immediately in a vortex of incidents.<sup>28</sup>

I found it intriguing that Chesterton had thought of this idea back in 1905 and felt that if this core theme had existed in historical literature for over 100 years that it must have surfaced somewhere in reality. Was this somehow linked to Neurocam? Was Neurocam a modern-day version of the 'Adventure and Romance Agency'? So far it didn't obviously appear to be a commercial enterprise, but couched within the intricate complexities of new types of games and marketing strategies, it was entirely possible. I mentally ran through all of the people I knew and wondered who would be the most likely to surreptitiously pay good money for me to have a GK Chesterton style 'experience'. And unlike "The Game", I was midway between birthdays, so it was obviously not a highly inventive birthday present.

Over the next few days I thought more about the implications of my Chesterton literature discovery. The idea of something like the 'Adventure and Romance Agency' was intriguing and exciting, not only to myself, but also probably for most people. It could almost be seen as the ultimate form of entertainment—far surpassing literature, theater, art, film, sport or games. It was based on the essence of human experience and what makes up the construct of our reality. Chesterton very eloquently writes about the need for this type of experience:

It has continually struck us that there is no element in modern life that is more lamentable than the fact that the modern man has to seek all artistic existence in a sedentary state. If he wishes to float into fairyland, he reads a book; if he wishes to dash into the thick of battle, he reads a book; if he wishes to soar into heaven, he reads a book; if he wishes to slide down the banisters, he reads a book. We give him these visions, but we give him exercise at the same time, the necessity of leaping from wall to wall, of fighting strange gentlemen, of running down long streets from pursuers -- all healthy and pleasant exercises. We give him a glimpse of that great morning world of Robin Hood or the Knights Errant, when one great game was played under the splendid

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<sup>28</sup> Gilbert Keith Chesterton, *The Club of Queer Trades* (BiblioBazaar, LLC, 2008, 1905), 27.

sky. We give him back his childhood, that godlike time when we can act stories, be our own heroes, and at the same instant dance and dream.<sup>29</sup>

I found myself hoping that Neurocam really was something like this; something that would make me feel alive, inspired and engaged in something exciting and mysterious. Something that tapped into childhood fantasies and relinquished adult responsibilities. I felt ready for anything that they would throw at me, no matter how far out of my comfort zone it might take me. I was not disappointed when I finally received my next instructions from Mr Hastings:

#### NEUROCAM TRAINING EXERCISE – NTE – 9001/01 – Covert Surveillance

##### (A) AIM

To hone operative (name withheld for security reasons) covert surveillance abilities in anticipation of future assignment requirements, via the observation of an arbitrary individual.

##### (B) EXECUTION

Below are the procedural details for this assignment. Any deviation from the operational protocol described may result in disciplinary action against the operative.

1. There is a map attached to this assignment. This map details the exact location you are to select your subject , and to follow them from. If possible, a camera should be taken on this assignment.

2. Travel to your location and find a suitable place to observe people in the area. Select your subject.

Note: take time to select your subject. This is a training exercise, it is important you select a person you can observe for at least 30 minutes.

3. Once your subject has been selected, take note of the time.

4. Begin tailing your selected subject.

5. Throughout this exercise, you are expected to make periodic notes on the movements and actions of your subject. In addition, whilst it is encouraged that you photograph the subject discreetly, a written description including identifying features will suffice. At no point are you to

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 28.



approach the target or let him/her become aware of your existence. For further details on this stipulation, please refer to the Operational Security Brief within this assignment.

6. Continue this exercise for at least 30 minutes.

7. Ensure you notate the location you cease tailing the target. If at any time the target enters a building you cannot enter, for whatever reason, remain outside the building so that you may continue tailing them if they should leave before the minimum time has elapsed.

8. Submit a report to the Operations Division [operations@neurocam.com](mailto:operations@neurocam.com). Photographic evidence is encouraged, but not essential.

#### (C) OPERATIONAL SECURITY

This is a 'covert' training exercise. If, at any point, the subject of your assignment becomes aware of your existence, you are to IMMEDIATELY abort the assignment. If this occurs, you are to vacate the area, wait 20 minutes, return and select a new subject.

Operatives are strictly forbidden from revealing any details pertaining to this assignment. Any operative found doing so will suffer immediate dismissal from Neurocam.

#### (D) TIMELINE

The time restrictions of Neurocam's ongoing operations dictate that Neurocam Training exercise NTE-9001/01 must be completed by (date withheld for confidentiality reasons).

Regards

Charles Hastings

Head, Operations Division

Neurocam International

This was certainly a departure from the pattern that had been forming with my assignments so far. I speculated that Neurocam wanted to hone my covert surveillance abilities in anticipation of future assignments to give me some training, as it were. Part of me was slightly less than enthusiastic about this, as I had anticipated something that pushed me into the thick of the

action. But this was Neurocam and I suspected that there would be significantly more to this assignment than a mere training exercise. With Chesterton's story fresh in my mind I imagined the situation might well be a set-up; that Neurocam would somehow steer me towards a 'target' who was working for them. Or they might be following me and something might happen while I was carrying out the exercise. As usual there was an infinite range of possibilities and the fact that what they had asked of me was actually very strange, not to mention borderline legally, morally and ethically questionable. To stalk some (possibly) random member of the public, secretly take pictures of them and email them to some anonymous shadowy organisation was quite a big ask. Sure, it took me out of my comfort zone, but to what end? In the context of an ongoing narrative it definitely intrigued me as I thought about the possibilities of future assignments where I would potentially need to use these newly acquired skills. This in itself was enough to motivate me to do something I found to be a little creepy and invasive yet strangely thrilling.

The map provided by Neurocam for this assignment marked out a starting point located at Flinders Street Station's Elizabeth Street exit. No time frame or date was given for when the assignment was to take place, but I had to complete it within a week. The location was a place that I frequented often during my weekly routine, so I knew that it was always busy and there would be no shortage of 'subjects'. I considered whether it would be better to do this at night or during the day; during the day I would be more visible, but at night there would be less people around. It felt very odd just thinking of the practicalities of what I was about to do.

The next day I planned to take the train to work so I would have to pass through Flinders Street Station anyway. There was no harm in doing some preliminary reconnaissance. It occurred to me that I was starting to change my routines because of Neurocam. Perhaps the very process of changing these routines was giving me some kind of experience; altering my destiny in some small but significant way. I was essentially accepting their directives without question. Any rationale for why this was acceptable was mainly coming from myself and from my own ideas in relation to what was happening to me. I thought about some of the sociological precedents for blindly following orders. Cult religions were renowned for brainwashing their members into

unquestioning loyalty to the cult leadership. But cult religions had very specific belief systems and strong, charismatic leaders who paid individual attention to the 'flock'. Neurocam could be fostering a band of blindly loyal followers, but there was no clear directive or even rapport between members. And there certainly wasn't a strong leader, unless the mysterious CEO Ms Fischer counted as one. If she was the leader, she certainly didn't spend any time making us lowly operatives feel special. I suppose there was some kind of belief system with Neurocam in that the element of mystery and excitement was in itself something we believed had meaning and relevance to our lives. Whether or not this was entirely self-constructed was as yet unclear. In this sense Neurocam was like a blank canvas onto which we projected our own ideas of what we wanted it to be.

As I stepped off the train at the tail end of rush hour, there were people everywhere rushing in all directions. I stopped walking, conscious of disrupting the flow, and observed them. If I was to randomly pick one of these individuals, how would I be able to identify them through the dense crowds as I tailed them for thirty minutes? Obviously choosing a thirty-something man of medium height in a charcoal-grey business suit would prove immensely challenging, so I would have to look for some uniquely identifying characteristics. Things that stand out in a crowd are actually surprisingly difficult to find during rush hour. The majority of commuters are dressed in a similar fashion and are on their way to work. I tried a test case and started following a tall man, distinguishable mainly by his suit trousers, which had way too much clearance above his nondescript dress shoes. As the man strode confidently through the crowd I matched his pace and slipped into step with him several paces behind. This went well until he paused to check his phone. Being one of those types who prefer not to attempt locomotion while reading or sending text messages, he stopped walking altogether and stood like an island in the middle of a moving sea of people. Matching this move was something I was totally unprepared for and as I stopped just behind him I realised how ridiculous I must look. I decided to abort this attempt and try again. It occurred to me that I was already late for work and needed to make getting there a priority. I regretted not being able to continue the assignment until later. Why would I rather muck about playing clumsy spy games in the street than go and make decent money doing something I was actually good at?

At work I was restless and distracted. I had an overwhelming urge to tell someone what was going on and get some much needed perspective, but worried that it might compromise my Neurocam adventures. As Neurocam had clearly stated, it was a choice: either play by their rules or walk away. Such an uncompromising proposition reminded me of a scene in the Wachowski brothers 1999 film "The Matrix"<sup>30</sup> where Keanu Reeves is forced to choose the red pill or the blue pill to either keep living his 'normal' life or step boldly into the unknown and discover something profound and disturbing. Of course Reeve's character Neo had no idea of the outcomes of this decision at the time; he had to take the risk and commit to something he knew very little about. Was this what I was doing with Neurocam? Taking a risk and committing myself to something I knew precious little about? I was again reminded of the enigmatic quote on Neurocam's website by CEO Bridget Fischer:

Some of the most rewarding experiences we have come about through random circumstances of which we have no real understanding. It is sometimes important to commit to something we know very little about if the act of commitment in itself becomes part of an experience.<sup>31</sup>

Obviously my commitment was part of my experience, but was I going to have a profoundly life-changing revelation like Neo who discovers that all life on Earth is nothing more than an elaborate facade created by a malevolent cyber-intelligence to placate us? And was it really a risk? Undertaking a task where I was effectively stalking someone did constitute a minor legal risk as one could potentially be arrested for harassment if the person being stalked made a complaint to the authorities. This was assuming that I would be on my own out there and Neurocam would not be monitoring the situation.

By lunchtime I had psyched myself into having another attempt at my training exercise. I walked back to my starting point armed with my trusty iPhone with which I could take pictures, video or notes without seeming too conspicuous. Loitering around the station entrance I was pleased to see that a more diverse crowd were present. I was poised for action, waiting for a distinguished

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<sup>30</sup> Larry and Andy Wachowski, "The Matrix," (USA: 1999).

<sup>31</sup> Neurocam, <http://www.neurocam.com> (accessed 10 November 2008).

subject to walk through the station gates. Seconds later a tall Afro-American woman in her early forties wearing a fluorescent lime-green t-shirt emerged. Looking at her long braided hair I knew that this was my target. I immediately fell into step with her and adjusted to her pace, which was much slower than I would usually walk. She was traveling light, with only a small handbag, and didn't look like she was off to work. Perhaps she had come into the city for some shopping.

As we made our way along Elizabeth Street with me following about 10 meters behind, I thought about the numerous movies or TV programs I had seen where covert surveillance had been a common theme. In these scenarios the person tailing the subject, usually a private investigator, seemed to be uncannily adept at following people for long periods of time while effortlessly blending into the crowd. As I stalked my victim trying to effect total nonchalance, I re-played many of these scenes in my head and thought about how sometimes our perception of reality is so heavily influenced by film and TV culture. It was very unusual for me to be in this situation in the first place, but even stranger that the only point of reference I had was related to pure fabrication.

As the woman I was following walked slowly but purposely along Elizabeth Street and turned right into Little Lonsdale Street, I realised that she was probably heading to Myers. Until now my task had been relatively simple, I had followed at a discreet distance and had successfully blended into the crowd. I had even managed a couple of snaps of my subject, taken when she was waiting at pedestrian crossings. While taking these shots I had tried to make it look as if I was simply checking my phone, albeit at a rather high angle. My suspicions were confirmed, as she turned right again into Myers and walked along the crowded isle towards what looked like the cosmetics department. I could already tell that this was going to make my task somewhat more difficult. As my subject reached the cosmetics department and began to browse lipstick and eye-shadow displays, I had to somehow counter her moves with some of my own that did not make me stand out like a creepy stalker. It was entirely possible that a man like myself could be browsing a women's cosmetic department for a present for a partner, sister or daughter.

I realised that I had never been in this situation before, in spite of the fact I was on official

Neurocam business. As I pretended to browse displays for cosmetics I didn't even know existed, I was all the while glancing over at my subject who seemed absorbed in her shopping. All of a sudden I became acutely aware that we were the only two people in that section of the store. This made the situation infinitely more fraught as I realised that looking at my subject was now a potential danger zone. This was confirmed as my next glance over at her was met with her looking directly back at me. I quickly looked away, but felt incredibly stressed and nervous. I had to do something; I couldn't abort the mission now. Being completely disarmed by the situation, all I could manage was to pick up an Estée Lauder lip-gloss tester and stare dumbly at it. I could sense the woman's presence, but was too afraid to look at her. At this point I realised that this was the answer; to sense her presence rather than overtly look at her. Adopting this technique I tuned into a kind of spatial awareness that connected us like two points on a flat plane. As she moved further away, I slowly gravitated closer, all the while not looking at her and keeping myself absorbed in my assumed role, which was pretending to be choosing make-up for a partner. This worked well and we were able to co-exist in a normal and non-threatening dynamic. As she eventually walked up to the counter to purchase some items I stole a glance at my phone and found that I had become so absorbed in the task at hand that I had actually exceeded my thirty-minute time requirement significantly.

I felt so invigorated at having overcome the challenge of covertly observing my subject at close range in a difficult situation that I wanted to continue. I knew that the real challenge would be to continue following her after she had seen me close-up in the cosmetics department. If she saw me after that she would surely suspect that I was following her and quite possibly take action. This meant that there was now far more at stake and I would not be able to make the slightest mistake. For the next hour I followed the woman in the lime-green t-shirt all around Melbourne Central and on a tram back to Flinders Street Station. I had mastered the art of covert surveillance.

That evening while I wrote up my report I wondered if Hastings would be proud of me for going beyond the call of duty. I decided to make excelling in every assignment my new strategy—if I was going to play this game I may as well get the highest score possible. Neurocam had

already told me that they were evaluating our performance, so I knew that they would notice my style of game play. In a moment of self-reflection I observed that instead of going out drinking with friends, I was spending a Friday night at home alone writing up an overly detailed report on bizarre actions I had carried out for a mysterious organisation of which I knew nothing about.

Later that evening after a few glasses of red and endless roaming around the Internet's more interesting nooks and crannies, I discovered a very intriguing link to a news article entitled "Kidnapping for Kicks in New York"<sup>32</sup>. In this article reporter Matt Wells investigates a bizarre new business in New York City where a team of artists are paid to violently kidnap clients. Each kidnapping is tailored for the client's specific needs and can take place at any time over a number of days or weeks, providing an element of surprise. This was really quite fantastic and very relevant to Fincher's idea of the CRS and Chesterton's Adventure and Romance Agency. So the idea of people subscribing to a business enterprise to receive an 'experience' had now transcended the realms of fiction. Jason, a carpenter in his mid-twenties had gone through the kidnap experience three times and says, "It's about stepping outside of yourself. I wanted to see what I could do."<sup>33</sup> What can one do when one is being kidnapped? Although this was in some ways more extreme, it was starting to sound uncannily similar to my recent experiences with Neurocam. Apparently Brock Enright, a twenty-five-year-old artist who originally set it up as a piece of video installation art, created the business. I wasn't an expert in American contemporary art, but I thought that kidnapping people on the streets of Manhattan seemed pretty radical even for the art world. I found it vaguely distasteful that contemporary American society accepted kidnapping as a leisure activity when there were still places in the world where real kidnapping was an everyday, life-threatening occurrence.

I thought about the similarities between Enright's kidnapping business and Neurocam International. Although Enright's kidnappings were spontaneous to a degree, the process was heavily mediated by an actual transaction in which the client was essentially paying for a

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<sup>32</sup> Matt Wells, "Kidnapping for Kicks in New York"  
<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/2163666.stm> (accessed 28th May 2008 2002).

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

service. So far Neurocam had not actively initiated any form of direct interaction with me and had relied on my willingness to participate to make things happen. This did not mean that they would not use direct action in the future however, and I admit that this thought excited me greatly. Having read about the New York kidnappings, I actually craved a similar type of experience. With Neurocam there was a frustrating lack of control in the process of interaction, as it did not conform to the structure of a commercial enterprise. Enright's kidnapping clients however were paying for something to happen, so they always knew that Enright and crew would (eventually) deliver. If they didn't, they would rightfully be able to ask for their money back. In my situation, I had signed up for something unknown and had not paid any money. I could not demand consumer satisfaction as no commercial contract had been entered into. The only precedent for this type experience I could find was Fowles' novel "The Magus", where the unsuspecting protagonist Nicholas Urfe enters a 'masque' and his reality is subverted by the elaborate machinations of an anonymous society whose motivations, even at the conclusion of the book, are unclear. Obviously Neurocam must be aware of all of these texts, movies and enterprises, but who were their real influences and what game were they really playing?



## Chapter 4: Bolte Bridge

Armed with my newly acquired skills in 'covert surveillance', I went about my daily routines with a sense of expectation. Neurocam played on my mind often and I found myself fantasising endlessly about the possibilities inherent in my last assignment. I felt special, as if I had a secret that I could not share with my friends and colleagues. Even on the duller days at work I had something else to contemplate that made my life seem more interesting. I felt like telling the constant string of unfortunate victims to whom I was attempting to sell vacuum cleaners that I had something else more important going on in my life; I was not merely a lowly call centre salesperson. I was a Neurocam Operative and I had secret business to attend to.

At the end of another dreary day of cold calls and endless abuse from randomly selected members of the general public, I flopped down behind my laptop with a much-needed beer. Upon checking my email I experienced the usual rush of excitement when I noticed a fresh email from Neurocam with "NCI - 7061/01" in the subject header. It had been almost two weeks since I had last heard from them. As I read on I almost fell off my chair:

NEUROCAM ASSIGNMENT - NCI - 7061/01 - [COUNTER-INTELLIGENCE INTERCEPT]

Area Search and Object Recovery

(A) AIM

The recovery of an object stolen from Neurocam International.

(B) CONTEXT

It has been brought to the attention of Neurocam's Human Resources Security Division that a disgruntled Neurocam operative has been engaging in corporate espionage. Prior to this individual being identified, several high security rated documents and other company properties were removed from Neurocam's Melbourne offices.

The operative responsible has been dismissed from the organisation, but, despite concerted efforts to the contrary on Neurocam's behalf to effect his detainment, he remains at large.

Intercepted communiqués have revealed that the operative intends to transfer the materials, to persons unknown, via the use of a covert 'dead drop' location. Although HR Security personnel have managed to identify the general vicinity where this will occur, the exact location remains unknown.

Neurocam's intelligence reports suggest that the operative will secrete the object at the 'dead drop' at approximately 4pm on (date withheld for security reasons). It is also expected that the object will be collected by the alternate party at approximately 7pm.

It is critical that the materials are located and recovered without the engagement of the other parties. Ongoing intelligence operations depend on the insurance of the covert nature of this operation until at least seven (7) days after it is completed.

#### (C) EXECUTION

Below are the procedural details for this assignment. Any deviation from the operational protocol, outlined below, will result in disciplinary action, and likely dismissal of the operative/s from Neurocam International. If there are any doubts about this please contact operations (operations@neurocam.com).

1. At 4.45pm on the (date withheld for security reasons) you are to arrive at the location detailed in the map provided.
2. Please be aware that you will be met at this location by other Neurocam operatives.
3. Without revealing excessive personal information, you will need to operate as a team to search the area for the materials. You are to begin no earlier than 5pm.
4. Neurocam's intelligence reports suggest that it is likely that there will be one object at the location which contains or acts as a key to detecting and/or accessing another secure item, that likely contains Neurocam's proprietary materials. Once you have located and recovered the item use whatever means are necessary to \*safely\* retrieve the materials.
5. Once the materials are secured you are to vacate the area in an expedient fashion, removing only Neurocam's materials, and leaving the location as close to the condition it was in when you arrived.
6. All operatives are then required to submit a detailed report of their specific involvement in this

assignment, and the nature of the events that occur, to the Operations Division (operations@neurocam.com) by close of business (date withheld for security reasons).

(D) OPERATIVE OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH AND SAFETY

It is known that part of the search area may be under water so sturdy, waterproof footwear will be required to facilitate a thorough search of the location.

(E) OPERATIONAL SECURITY

Operatives are strictly forbidden from revealing any details pertaining to this assignment. Any operative found doing so will suffer immediate expulsion from Neurocam.

Please note—due to the deployment of multiple operatives it is essential that all operatives display their Neurocam Identifiers throughout their participation in this assignment. This will enable operatives to verify each others' affiliation and limit the potential for infiltration by operatives working against Neurocam International's interests.

(F) TIMELINE

It is essential that Neurocam Operatives do not arrive before 4.45pm. An early arrival may alert the rogue operative to our intentions.

In addition, to ensure the safety of all operatives, and the viability of continued counter-intelligence operations, it is critical that all operatives have vacated the search area by 6.30pm, prior to the arrival of the alternate parties.

Regards

Charles Hastings

Head, Operations Division



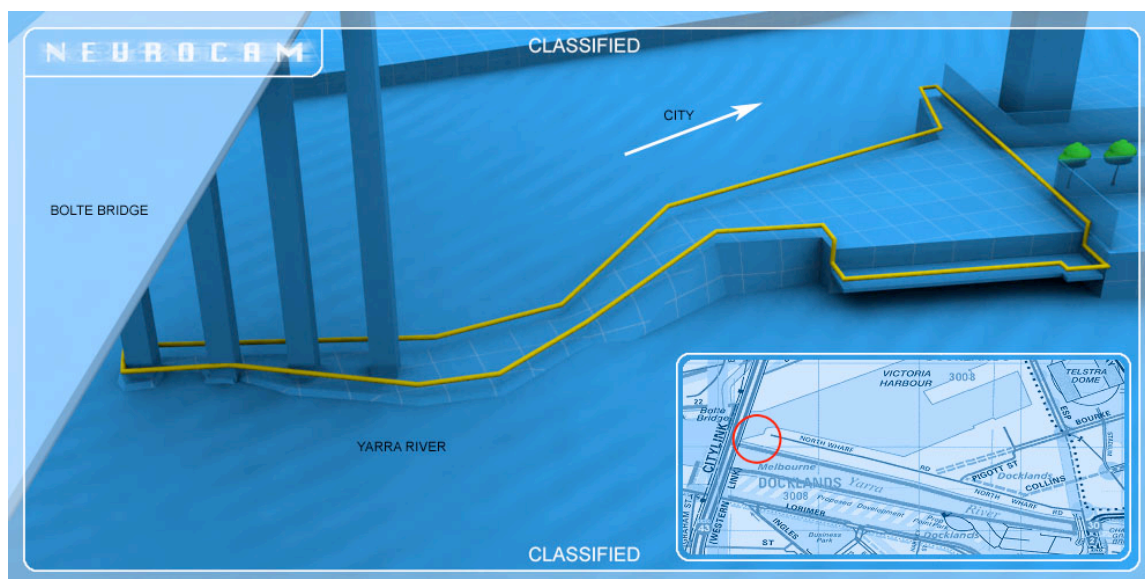


Fig. 2. Map showing location of designated search area from email attachment.

This was quite incredible. My mind raced with the exciting opportunities my new assignment opened up and I felt like an eager school kid who wanted to put his hand up and interrupt the teacher. Above all, I could see that a narrative was forming. Neurocam had finally imparted some additional information regarding their status and modus operandi. And, I was going to meet some other Neurocam operatives! I had always had a sense that I was not alone in this venture, but now this was to be confirmed.

Detaching myself from the initial giddy excitement this assignment brought on, I thought about the implications of the task. If Neurocam had indeed been the victim of industrial espionage, why would they attempt to engage unskilled volunteers like myself to clean up the mess? This seemed highly unlikely and signified a shift away from the realms of credibility towards something infinitely more theatrical. And did Neurocam really have 'Melbourne Offices'? If so, why couldn't I simply walk in the front door and speak to Hastings face-to-face? Something was indeed fishy, but in the context of what I had already undertaken, did not seem any less appealing. The general terms of engagement seemed to revolve around obeying their instructions without question, something that most definitely involved a suspension of rational disbelief. This brought to mind a fantastic quote from Fowles' novel "The Magus" in which the mysterious prankster/puppet master Conchis tells Nicholas that, "I do not ask you to believe. All

I ask you is to pretend to believe. It will be easier.”<sup>34</sup>

So perhaps the parameters of whatever game Neurocam were playing revolved around participants accepting what they told us as *if* it were the truth, and acting accordingly. In the context of games, stories and theatre, this made sense to me. When I had been researching ARGs a few weeks back, I had come across an interesting article by game designer and theorist Jane McGonigal, who presented the argument that gamers maximise their interactions by simulating a belief system where they suspend rational disbelief in order to immerse themselves within a narrative. She states that:

The best pervasive games *do* make you more suspicious, more inquisitive, of your everyday surroundings. A good immersive game will show you game patterns in non-game places; these patterns reveal opportunities for interaction and intervention. The more a player chooses to believe, the more (and more interesting) opportunities are revealed.<sup>35</sup>

To illustrate this point McGonigal cites the example of a 2002 ARG called the “Go Game” where a team of players were instructed via mobile phone to carry out a complex mission on the streets of San Francisco and found themselves in the lobby of the Hilton Hotel. Having already encountered several ‘plants’—actors hired by the game’s designers who had assisted them in carrying out their mission—they assumed that they would find another plant in the hotel’s lobby. When approached by a hotel staff member they thought that he was the plant and when he appeared unwilling to assist them in their task, thought that this was part of his ‘act’.

During my last assignment, I had experienced a similar kind of hyper-awareness in which I had found myself questioning the smallest details making up my immediate reality to the point where I had transposed my own (perhaps rather paranoid) narrative onto the situation. If I was to consider that Neurocam *was* a pervasive game, then I had to consider the possibility that I was equally responsible for fabricating some kind of alternate reality. Whoever I was going to meet at the group assignment would no doubt be part of the game in some way, whether they were

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<sup>34</sup> Fowles, 137.

<sup>35</sup> Jane McGonigal, “A Real Little Game: The Performance of Belief in Pervasive Play,” in *“Level Up” Conference*, ed. Digital Games Research Association (DiGRA) (University of Utrecht, The Netherlands: 2003), 22.

players like myself, plants hired by Neurocam, or the puppet masters themselves.

Whatever type of experience Neurocam was, it was my sole intention at this point to maximise my immersion into its world. I was going to pretend to believe and treat everything they threw at me as if it were real. I wasn't exactly sure of the implications of this approach, but I figured I would find out soon enough.

On a moody grey Sunday afternoon I drove down to the Docklands area wearing my Neurocam Identifier badge and a shiny new pair of gumboots I had purchased earlier in the week. I parked near the north wharf just before 4.45pm and walked towards the rendezvous point specified on Neurocam's map. As I approached the area I saw some people fishing off the wharf and a young guy seated on a bench, obviously waiting for something. Although it seemed likely he was another operative, he seemed very self-contained and I didn't approach him, but instead went to the end of the wharf and surveyed the area beyond it.

Before long a car pulled up and a portly guy in his late twenties in a black t-shirt with dyed-black hair distinctively worn long at the back and almost entirely receded at the top, emerged from it and started looking around. I caught his eye and we approached each other, noting each other's Neurocam Identifiers as we drew closer. We introduced ourselves, both producing pens and notepads (his an A4 lecture pad, mine a little pocket notebook) to write down each other's names, with some mutual amusement at the strangeness of the situation.

He identified himself as Shemjaza or Shem. We talked a bit about the assignment and characteristics of the location, including the people currently present at the scene. We decided to indirectly approach the young man sitting on the bench and see how he reacted.

His response to our approach was consistent with that of someone expecting to meet strangers, and once we had exchanged cursory greetings, he produced his identifier badge from his pocket. We then introduced ourselves; he gave his name as Roger. He was probably in his late-teens, skinny and very reserved.

We discussed peoples' potential willingness to get their feet wet. Shem and I noted that we had both come prepared for this eventuality.

At 4.50pm another operative arrived on foot, a young Asian guy in a bright orange t-shirt who approached us with little hesitation. He introduced himself as Colin. Shem and I both got out our notebooks again.

We continued to talk about the assignment; what the two items were likely to be, how many people we thought would show up, etc. I'd brought a printout of the assignment briefing and read over parts of it aloud.

The next operative to arrive was a sturdy middle-aged man who gave his name as Auto 04, followed shortly after by an older woman called Arachni who sat down on the bench, lit up a small marijuana pipe and began inhaling the sweet-smelling smoke. She was obviously attempting to follow Neurocam's widely advertised directive—'get out of your mind'.

Next to arrive was a diminutive middle-aged man named American Guy, then a man in his twenties who arrived on a motorbike and introduced himself as Wintermute. Next arrived a woman in her twenties or early thirties called Bunny.

By this point, Shemjaza had fallen into the role of name-taker, and as such had become a focal point for the group. I was still standing next to him and also taking notes (apparently we were the only ones doing this) whilst those who had arrived subsequently were gathered around us in a vague semicircle, and I felt a bit like the deputy sheriff, although I didn't take any kind of leadership role in subsequent proceedings. Shem, on the other hand, sustained a vague leadership role throughout the operation.

I thought about the strangeness of the situation and the fact that everyone who had arrived so far seemed to be convincingly playing the role of Neurocam operatives on assignment. Even

Shem's assumed leadership role did not appear in any way suspicious; he appeared to be a natural leader and it was obvious that the operation needed some kind of organisation. I wondered if any of the people around me were secretly operating on another level, working for Neurocam as plants in order to steer events in a certain direction. I decided to keep a lookout for any actions that seemed in any way unnatural or contrived.

Next to arrive was Jonathan, a fresh-faced Apple Centre retail rep from Moonie Ponds. Shortly after that a guy probably in his twenties called Xade arrived accompanied by a woman of similar age who announced herself as Johanna initially, later defaulting to JoJo.

A large group arrived next. At Shemjaza's request, they announced their names: MK Ultra (male, in his 20s–30s?), Benjamin (male, teens), Tosh (male, unsure), Plasmo (female, teens or early 20s), Dubya (male, teens or early 20s), Fraggie (male, 50s), Tillops (male, unsure), BishBash (unsure), and Binkus (unsure). Following these arrivals was Fleegle (female, 20s?).

At approximately 5.10pm, Shemjaza asked for a show of hands as he wanted to know who was willing to get their feet wet. Maybe 10 or so people were. He proposed that those operatives explore the area beyond the edge of the wharf, meaning the rocks leading down to the water and around the pillars under the bridge, whilst everyone else covered the remaining area. A vague consensus was reached that anyone who found anything interesting should yell out and that if no-one was able to find anything after twenty-minutes or so, we should reassemble at the bench to re-think our collective strategy. Whilst these arrangements were being discussed, two more operatives arrived—Nathan (male, 20s) and Aliask (male, teens).

I opted to start off searching the rocks leading down to the water. I scrutinised many plastic bottles and peered into many nooks and crannies. I pulled a red plastic chair out of the water, but it was revealed to be just a red plastic chair. I moved down towards the bridge pillars and joined the group investigating that area.

At around 5.20pm we heard shouts from the surface of the wharf. A group had assembled



around an area on its right-hand edge, facing the river. Operative Nathan had discovered a stoppered glass bottle suspended over the edge of the wharf on a length of string. The bottle was filled with yellow water, and contained a small piece of paper with Neurocam branding on one side, and the digits 236405 handwritten on the other.

Whilst this object was being examined and discussed, American Guy came over from his search area and showed us something of interest that he had discovered. He had a handbag filled mostly with women's clothes: a short black skirt; some stockings; some old-fashioned, very conservative underwear which, if I recall correctly, included a corset; a pair of circular plastic clothes hangers; a spare, unopened pair of stockings; a small plastic spray bottle, which may have contained deodorant or mouth-freshener; a leather belt; and a cheap shoulder-length red-black wig in fairly good condition. He had found this object and some other apparently related items under some bushes just outside the designated area.

These items were also examined and discussed. There was uncertainty about their relevance to the assignment. Some operatives including myself, Jonathan, American Guy and Benjamin, went to make further examinations of the bushes where the handbag had been found. Draped across the bushes were a sweater and blouse that seemed to belong with the rest of the clothes and a single, long stiletto boot. I did not establish whether these items had been found in that location or had been moved there subsequent to discovery.

I looked inside the boot and systematically unpacked the handbag. The banal, valueless nature of the items; their discovery outside the designated search area; and the absence of anything which could be connected with the number in the bottle amongst them, all pointed to the conclusion that they were not what we were looking for. I did suspect that Neurocam personnel planted these items for the assignment as a red herring. If this were the case, it would have meant that Neurocam had set up the circumstances of the assignment deliberately and that contrary to the briefing, we were not engaged in a genuine interception exercise. By why would they go to so much trouble to set up such an elaborate hoax?

I moved back into the designated area and went back to exploring the rocks. I encountered Xade, who'd discovered two paper napkins with interesting messages scrawled on them in pen, both dated 28/11/08. He said he'd found them inside plastic bottles amongst the rocks. One said something like "Max—Hi, how is everyone going? I'm in Australia. Hope you are good." The other said "[illegibly noted name]—Hi, here's a bottle and a bag." Just as I was wondering whether this meant that maybe the handbag was important after all, excited shouts began issuing from under the bridge to the effect that 'it' had been found. This was at about 5.40pm.

'It' turned out to be a metal briefcase, which had been discovered by Operative Dubya, partly concealed inside an opening on the underside of an overhead lighting turret, attached to the furthest pillar under Bolte Bridge, facing the river. The briefcase was unreachable without some kind of elevation. Fortunately, an old wooden ladder had been discovered in the area earlier and someone went and retrieved it. I wondered if this was a coincidence or if it had been deliberately planted there. Dubya scaled the rickety ladder and retrieved the briefcase. I was intrigued to note that the briefcase was identical to the one I had held in my possession for my earlier assignment. I wondered if any of the others had been part of that assignment and also made the connection. Perhaps this was a vital part of the narrative.

So far I had sensed a general reluctance from everyone present to talk about their Neurocam involvement and other assignments they had participated in. It was as if we were all scared to compromise our positions by breaching Neurocam's clearly stated confidentiality protocols. Or it might have been because we were all collectively suspending rational disbelief by playing the game in a similar way. This created a strange atmosphere; we had to work together to complete the assignment at hand, but we were all paranoid about each other and who might be a spy or a plant reporting any misconduct back to the puppet masters.

Once Dubya had brought down the briefcase, we had to decide what to do with it. Shem pointed out that it was likely that this was the object we were supposed to intercept and we should simply take it with us, contact Neurocam as soon as possible and await further instructions. Dubya, being the one who found the briefcase, seemed to be acting somewhat possessively as

if it was his prize to claim. Someone else wanted to open it and see what was inside. The majority favoured this idea in spite our instructions being to “use whatever means are necessary to \*safely\* retrieve the materials”. A discussion about how to open the combination locked briefcase followed and Aliask suggested using the numbers found in the submerged bottle as the code. The numbers worked and the briefcase was opened to reveal a small dictaphone.

Everyone gathered excitedly around Dubya as he played the tape in the device. A male voice, which had been digitally altered to disguise the narrator’s identity, welcomed us as if this moment had been expected. The voice identified itself as Charles Hastings and congratulated us on successfully completing the assignment, revealing that it had been a staged ‘team training exercise’. This seemed to me to be further reinforcement of the idea that this had all been staged as part of a pervasive game. I wondered if the people around me had formed the same conclusions. Hastings also instructed all present to acquire a white Japanese kabuki mask for use on a future assignment, which was to be cut away below the upper lip, removing the chin section. He reminded us to leave the scene as we’d found it, instructed JoJo to retain the briefcase, Bunny to retain the dictaphone, and reminded all of us to submit our assignment reports as soon as possible. It was more than a little creepy to hear Hastings refer to specific operatives by name and I got the feeling that this made us all slightly suspicious of Bunny and JoJo.

Several operatives made their own recordings of Hastings’ statement whilst it was played, including Ben and Aliask. General conversation between operatives ensued about the contents of the message, which many operatives including myself, had found difficult to hear all details of the assignment. Some operatives exchanged web and email addresses in spite of being uncertain of whether or not this was allowed. Someone was dispatched to return the ladder.

At around this point two males, probably in their early twenties arrived at the scene—one Asian, one Caucasian. The Asian guy was wearing a Neurocam Identifier. The Caucasian guy claimed, upon enquiry, that he had lost his, which made the company slightly hesitant, but it seemed to be generally accepted that they were bona fide operatives, despite an initial sense of communal

suspicion that they might be interlopers, or part of some kind of setup. They made comments to the effect of, "What did we miss? Presumably everything?" To which there were general murmurs of confirmation. Shemjaza asked for their names. The Asian guy identified himself as Lord [Something] and the Caucasian guy said his name was Kane.

Xade and Jojo were standing at the base of the pillar directly under the lighting turret at this juncture; Xade was brandishing the two napkins for the benefit of various operatives who wanted to photograph them. I asked him if I could note down the messages. He gave the napkins to me. I copied out their contents (very illegibly, as it turned out) then handed them back to him.

With the assignment complete and the time approaching 6pm, everyone wandered back up to the end of the wharf and started to disperse. Shem, who'd come by car, asked if anyone wanted a lift anywhere, but no-one took him up on it. Walking up the wharf, I asked Ben if he'd be able to send me his audio file of the tape recording. I thanked him and walked back to my car.

That evening I reflected on the day's events and my first experience meeting other people engaging in the same spurious activities as myself. I thought about the demographic; although the crowd had been mostly male there were several women present. I imagined that taking the kind of risks I had taken would be an activity possibly preferred by men, but I couldn't be sure. I recalled the woman I had given the briefcase to and considered that perhaps Neurocam had all kinds of assignments; some interconnecting and others individual challenges. I didn't really have enough information to speculate about the gender balance in relation to the tasks we were given. I had noticed that the age range was quite diverse ranging from people in their late-teens to mid-fifties. And judging by the clothing people were wearing and what I had gleaned from brief conversations with some of them, they didn't seem to conform to any particular stereotype. Like myself, they were probably all drawn to the mystery of Neurocam and willing to play along with whatever they threw at us. Or did they have other motivations that I was unaware of?

I thought more about Jane McGonigal's theory about pervasive game play in relation to the

outcome of the assignment. Having the message from Hastings delivered via a dictaphone which we had found in a briefcase unlocked by a code found in a bottle seemed exactly like elements in the types of games McGonigal discussed and dissected. She was concerned with a new type of game, which began online and moved out into the real world, integrating real life with fabrication. Apart from a lack of labelling and a clearly outlined context, Neurocam could have been doing something very similar. And all of us wanted to believe that it was real; that we really were working together to solve this meta-narrative mystery. McGonigal claims that:

The key to immersive design is to realize that the clear visibility of the puppetmasters' work behind the curtain does not lessen the players' enjoyment. Rather, a beautifully crafted and always visible frame for the play heightens (and makes possible in the first place) the players' pleasure – just as long as the audience can play along, wink back at the puppetmasters and *pretend* to believe.<sup>36</sup>

I wondered if she had read “The Magus”. This all fitted beautifully apart from one key aspect: the work of Neurocam’s puppet masters behind the curtain was *not* visible. In fact they had gone to a lot of trouble to make sure that there was nil possibility of winking back at them while we played along.

Again I thought of “The Magus” and how Fowles rationalised the strange activities encountered by the main protagonist as a new concept in theatre. Conchis, a character written clearly in terms that McGonigal would identify as a puppet master, tells Nicholas that:

During the war, when I had a great deal of time to think, and no friends to amuse me, I conceived of a new kind of drama. One in which the conventional separation between actors and audience was abolished. In which the conventional scenic geography, the notions of proscenium, stage, auditorium were completely discarded. In which the continuity of performance, either in time or place, was ignored. And in which the action, the narrative was fluid, with only a point of departure and a fixed point of conclusion. Between these points the participants invent their own drama.<sup>37</sup>

There was a significant difference between McGonigal’s puppet masters and what Fowles is proposing—Fowles was most certainly not talking about altering reality to facilitate some kind of game. If anything was discernible from Fowles’ obtuse story, it was pointing more to a type of art form that utilised the very fabric of reality to construct (aesthetic) experiences for

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>37</sup> Fowles, 404.

participants. And yet this was altogether different from GK Chesterton's idea of a society that manufactured experiences to inject some excitement into the lives of its subscribers. Perhaps "The Magus" was the key. The experiences constructed for the main character seemed to show him new ways of looking at the world around him as well as teaching him about his own psychology through exploring his relationships with others. It was plausible that this idea related to the power of theatre and immersive narratives to facilitate transformative experiences. I wondered whether Neurocam had already arranged a 'fixed point of conclusion', which would clarify things at some point in the future.

In the days that followed I thought more and more about Neurocam and what it was. I emailed a couple of operatives I had exchanged email addresses with on the assignment and asked for their thoughts on the matter. Both were reluctant to discuss Neurocam, which made me somehow suspicious of them. Disclosing details of assignments was clearly forbidden, but discussing the nature of Neurocam seemed reasonable. Perhaps they knew more than I did and had their own set of restrictions. When I wasn't working I spent a lot of time on the Internet hunting around for clues as to what new activities were going on in the world that might have some bearing on the mystery I was embroiled within. The gaming world didn't seem to have changed much over the last few months and pervasive games were still operating largely as either viral marketing strategies or interactive entertainment. There was no mention of any such games that were operating anonymously or subversively; authorship and terms of engagement were always clearly defined. The kidnapping business in New York appeared to be an enterprise that hadn't caught on anywhere else in the world. I was all but out of leads when I received an email from a friend who was really excited about an art project she had recently participated in.

My friend was living in London and had heard about a performance art group based in Ireland who called themselves "Ivan's Dogs"<sup>38</sup>. Apparently these people attempted to create unsettling and unpredictable experiences for a diverse audience by taking willing participants on mysterious guided trips to unknown locations. They operated from a central website which

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<sup>38</sup> Ivan's Dogs, *Untitled* 2005, Ireland

deliberately offered minimal information about who they were and what they do, and always disguised their identities by wearing dog head masks. Generally they were said to regard their audience as prisoners, treating them roughly and forcing them to complete grueling tasks such as digging trenches in stony ground.

My friend related a fantastic and terrifying account of how she had travelled to Ireland for her 'appointment' with the Dogs and been roughly thrown in the back of a white van, driven to a deserted area above some seaside cliffs and made to dig a grave for herself while the Dogs continuously berated her. At one point she had needed to use the toilet and had been ushered to a filthy outhouse and locked inside for over an hour while her escort regaled her with colorful tales of the area's local history. She said that although she had known that the experience was perpetrated by a group of performance artists, she had at times felt genuinely scared by the unpredictability of the situation and the performers' relentless maintenance of character.

Very interested in the idea of a group of artists staging activities that were so similar to Neurocam, I emailed my London friend back and asked her for more details. The next day she replied with a link to their website and told me that she had heard about them through friends at an art gallery opening. In response to my question about how she knew that they were artists if their website gave away very little information, she said that she didn't really know for sure, but her friends had told her that they had featured on an arts website. I brought up their website and it certainly didn't mention anything about who they were or what they were doing beyond taking 'appointments'. I googled them and came across a link to the arts website they were mentioned on. It was a site that featured reviews on various art projects happening in the UK at that time, and contained an article from a reviewer who had been on his own Dogs adventure. The article mentioned that the Dogs were a 'performance art collective', but did not refer to any of their previous projects, biographies or anything to substantiate this claim.

I found it fascinating that artists might engage in these kinds of activities; to give an audience an experience outside of the confines of the gallery space that was not a passive spectacle. In my understanding of performance art, artists had done some pretty crazy things, but the audience

was still very much the audience, knowing that they were witnessing something done in the name of art. What was different in this case was the fact that the Dogs were creating tailor-made experiences for audiences, of which the outcomes were dependent on how participants reacted to the situation at hand. If someone was told to dig a grave, they had the option of refusing. If this happened I imagined that they would simply do something else.

I thought about the positioning of the artists themselves and how they chose to remain anonymous, rather than credit themselves as the perpetrators of the work. This was not something I had heard of before in the context of art practice and not something that I fully understood. I saw art as something clearly defined and the people who created it as always being somehow separate from the audience. As far as I knew the Dogs represented an entirely new precedent and something that related to Fowles' concept of a 'new kind of theatre'. The similarities to Neurocam were striking, although I hadn't yet seen or heard of anyone who had referred to Neurocam as a new type of performance art project. I was excited, as this example seemed like a better fit than pervasive games, Chesterton's Adventure and Romance Agency idea, and even "The Magus". I decided to explore the idea that I was participating in a new type of art experience.



## Chapter 5: Career Advancement Opportunity

After the Bolte Bridge assignment I went about my banal day-to-day activities in a kind of trance. I felt as if I was living parallel lives—one as a boring call centre worker attempting to sell vacuum cleaners over the phone, and the other as a secret agent for a nefarious organisation of unknown origins. It was somehow comforting to know that there were other people in Melbourne probably leading a similar kind of existence. I thought about some of the people I had met on the assignment and recalled that the ones who had talked about what they did for a living had ordinary, unremarkable jobs like myself.

I had struck up friendships with a handful of the operatives I had met via email and although they were still largely reluctant to discuss Neurocam, I sensed that this might change if I persisted. Occasionally we would joke about our 'secret lives' and referred to 'that which we can not speak about'. I had never really had 'online friends' before, but this seemed like a natural way to engage with people I had met through such peculiar circumstances. It turned out that we all had a lot in common and shared very similar interests and I wondered if this was what had drawn us all to Neurocam in the first place. I tried to isolate a particular quality that my new friends shared, but could only narrow it down to a similar interest in online research into anything new and unusual going on in the world. At a stretch it could be said that we were all people who engaged with the world of ideas in a more intellectual way than your average person. Or were we simply spending too much time online and not engaging in enough real-world social interaction? Strangely, it occurred to me that all of us would rather spend our evenings online than watching TV, which I guess was something else differentiating us from the general public. It occurred to me that the people who had the most information on the demographics of a Neurocam Operative were probably those behind the curtain.

I thought more about the idea of Neurocam possibly being some kind of experimental performance art project and did some research to find out what was going on within this genre in the art world these days. I started off by looking at the definition of performance art to see if it was the right fit. In an attempt to define this rather elusive genre, arts writer Kyle Chayka writes

that:

If we were to assign performance art a single defining characteristic, it would probably be the fact that a piece of performance art must be centered on an action carried out or orchestrated by an artist, a time-based rather than permanent artistic gesture that has a beginning and an end. Documentation of the performance might live on forever, from photos and artifacts to full video documentation, but the performance itself is ephemeral. If you were lucky enough to be in the audience, then what you witnessed was the true work of performance art.<sup>39</sup>

So was Neurocam an ephemeral set of actions carried out by an artist? It was possible, but after further reading it seemed that performance art itself was bound by certain constraints such as necessitating the presence of an actual 'performer' as well as the elements of space, time and the relationship of the performer to the audience. In this sense the term performance art appeared to adequately describe art activities such as the curious 'tours' run by "Ivan's Dogs", but I wasn't so sure about events where the artists were neither present, nor even acknowledged. After extensive digging, I could not find any examples of performances where the artists were not present during the actual events.

Another definition I had come across that seemed more apt was 'happening', where "a performance, event or situation could be considered art"<sup>40</sup>. Apparently happenings can "take place anywhere, are often multi-disciplinary, usually lack a narrative and frequently seek to involve the audience in some way."<sup>41</sup> Happenings were also known to leave considerable room for improvisation. This was more like it.

So was Neurocam an art happening? Upon further research I disappointingly discovered that the term happening was rather antiquated within the context of contemporary art practice, and mainly referred to a bunch of artists in the 60s getting together and painting while others played music or old records and danced. I imagined that there was probably a fair amount of LSD involved as well...

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<sup>39</sup> Kyle Chayka, "Wtf Is...Performance Art?" <http://hyperallergic.com/25076/wtf-is-performance-art/> (accessed 18 July 2011).

<sup>40</sup> "Wikipedia", <http://en.wikipedia.org/> (accessed 6 April 2010).

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

Another interesting term I came across was 'conceptual art', which American artist Sol LeWitt defines with the following statement:

In conceptual art the idea or concept is the most important aspect of the work. When an artist uses a conceptual form of art, it means that all of the planning and decisions are made beforehand and the execution is a perfunctory affair. The idea becomes a machine that makes the art.<sup>42</sup>

LeWitt is essentially describing a type of art practice where the concepts or ideas informing the work seem to take precedence over traditional aesthetic and material concerns. I couldn't begin to imagine what concepts or ideas the creators of Neurocam might be grappling with if they were trying to create a work of conceptual art. Were they making some kind of statement about how far people were willing to go to belong to something? Were they dealing with anti-establishment themes? As far as traditional aesthetic and material concerns went, the attention to detail I had experienced with Neurocam seemed every bit as meticulous as a quality theatre production, although arguably anything but traditional. It was very strange to think of Neurocam as a 'work', especially a work having been created by an artist or a group of artists. This made me think of *what* would make Neurocam art and brought to mind a quote I had come across by Tony Godfrey, author of "Conceptual Art," who asserts that "conceptual art questions the nature of what is understood as art."<sup>43</sup> It seemed logical to me that Neurocam might well be questioning the nature of *what* art is, but I still wasn't sure if it *was* art. I had to find some more examples like "Ivan's Dogs".

A few days later I was invited to a dinner party and reluctantly attended in spite of wanting to spend the evening at home on my computer. I thought that it was probably good to get out and interact with people after spending so much time alone on the Internet and obsessing over Neurocam. At the dinner party I met an artist from New Zealand who had recently moved to Australia. We had an interesting discussion about her practice—which mainly involved large-scale wall drawings—and what was going on in the NZ art scene. My ears pricked up when she

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<sup>42</sup> Lewitt, Sol, "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art " [http://www.ddooss.org/articulos/idiomas/Sol\\_Lewitt.htm](http://www.ddooss.org/articulos/idiomas/Sol_Lewitt.htm) (accessed 21 July 2011).

<sup>43</sup> Tony Godfrey, *Conceptual Art*(London : Phaidon, 1998., 1998), 4.

mentioned a very bizarre art event she had attended a few years ago that had been staged by a friend of hers who was also an artist. I prodded her for more details and she happily told me the full story over several glasses of wine.

The work was called “Project George”<sup>44</sup> and was staged in Christchurch, NZ during 1998 by artist Jason Maling. Maling attempted to engage an audience in constructing a narrative by focusing on events that had already transpired over several months. In his opening speech at a gallery set up as a detective’s office, Maling informed his audience that they all knew why they were there, and were all implicated in the strange events which had been happening over the last few months. Delivering his lines much like a detective on a case, he proceeded to present fragments of audiovisual material, which were supposedly part of the ‘investigation’. Over the next few weeks he used his impromptu office to interrogate members of the audience who came to see the show. People began to engage with his narrative and brought him several objects (as evidence) that were supposedly part of the ‘investigation’. In an advertised closing event, people turned up to the gallery to find it completely vandalised and Maling nowhere to be seen.

Now I was getting somewhere. Maling’s “Project George” was very similar conceptually to the “Ivan’s Dogs” project. Maling had essentially been creating a fabricated narrative by asking the general public to participate in that narrative as if it were a real-life situation. He was not labeling or contextualising the project as art or portraying himself as an artist or the sole creator of the work. His role was to facilitate a series of events that set up the possibility for engagement, much like some of the pervasive games I had been looking at.

After looking at the documentation of the work on Maling’s website, it occurred to me that an interesting aspect of the work was that he had not been in any way dishonest with his audience. His investigation into what he considered a series of ‘strange occurrences’ was based entirely on things he had found in reality and attempted to connect together in unusual ways. He had showed a slide taken in Italy of a burned out car with some graffiti on it and linked the text to something completely unrelated in London, which was then connected to something in Australia

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<sup>44</sup> Jason Maling, *Project George*, 1998, Christchurch, New Zealand.

and so on. So the audience really was implicated in that his meta-narrative canvas was that of the world around us in which anything could potentially relate to everything if we looked at it in a particular way. I thought this idea was pure genius.

So the question was, what were the similarities and differences between “Project George” and Neurocam? An obvious difference was that Maling had put himself forward as a public front for his project, whereas I had yet to meet any of Neurocam Management in real-life. Neurocam were infinitely more secretive about their activities whereas Maling had been up-front about everything in spite of the apparent strangeness inherent in what he was doing. His project was also mysterious, but in a more humorous, absurdist way. Another point of difference between the two projects was Maling’s use of a known gallery space as his head quarters. The people who were invited to the event were no doubt selected from the gallery mailing list and probably went along expecting a performance art event or an installation. Which is ultimately what they got, although it was admittedly stretching the boundaries of what is considered performance art and installation. Neurocam was engaging a far broader audience, selected via the great leveling device of an advertising hoarding rather than anything so highbrow as a gallery mailing list.

Both projects were however creating a spontaneous narrative, which engaged the public in a series of improvised scenarios. “Project George” involved people in an investigation looking into strange goings on, and Neurocam created enough intrigue to motivate people to initiate their own investigations into what Neurocam actually was. Another striking similarity was that both works (assuming that Neurocam was an artwork) required a tacit agreement from the audience to suspend rational disbelief and engage with the narrative framework *as if* it were real. This was something I had come across frequently when looking at pervasive games, but seemed to be an entirely new concept when considering the ways in which audiences responded to artworks. With “Ivan’s Dogs” the audience was forced to accept the reality in which they were placed, but participation in “Project George” and Neurocam required accepting a construct, which was more akin to the way we witness some types of film or theater.

On Maling’s website he was advertising a new project where he wanted people to make an

appointment to see “The Vorticist”<sup>45</sup>. He gave no clues as to who or what ‘The Vorticist’ was, or what this new project was about. I guessed that people would probably engage with his new work on the strength of his reputation alone. I decided to make an appointment and find out what it was all about. Was it possible that Neurocam was just one of a number of strange new art activities going on all around us?

Later that week I got home from another soul destroying day of work to find the details of my next assignment.

#### NEUROCAM ASSIGNMENT – NTC – 5781/01 – CAREER ADVANCEMENT SUITABILITY ASSESSMENT

##### (A) AIM

A face-to-face assessment of an operative’s suitability for career advancement.

##### (B) CONTEXT

The 1st phase of Neurocam International’s 2005 operations is drawing to a close.

Due to a disparity between the number of active field operatives and the number of operatives required for phase two, Neurocam has decided to downsize its operational work force. To this end it has been determined that a face-to-face assessment of each operative is required.

Based upon the outcomes of this assessment a determination will be made as to whether each operative should; be recommended for career advancement, be retained in Neurocam’s services at their current status, or dismissed from the organisation.

‘Chess problems demand from the composer the same virtues that characterise all worthwhile art: originality, invention, conciseness, harmony, complexity, and splendid insincerity.’ - Vladimir Nabokov, ‘Poems and Problems’, 1969

##### (C) EXECUTION

Below are the procedural details for this assignment. Any deviation from the operational

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<sup>45</sup> Jason Maling, *The Vorticist*, Live Art, 2005, Melbourne, Australia.

protocol described may result in a requirement of disciplinary action against the operative.

1. Between 8–10pm on Tuesday or Wednesday (date withheld for security reasons) you must arrive at (address withheld for security reasons). Before entering the venue, you must ensure that you are wearing both your white facemask and Neurocam Identifier.
2. Upon entering the building, purchase a drink and proceed upstairs where you will be met by a number of other operatives, all of whom will be similarly masked. Please be aware, two of these operatives will be members of Neurocam's Management Team.
3. Around the venue you will notice a number of chessboards. As soon as a chessboard is free, you must approach another operative, state your Neurocam Operative name and challenge them to a game of chess.
4. Beyond the exchange of your Neurocam name, you are strictly forbidden from discussing Neurocam in any way throughout your match.
5. Once the game has been won or lost, you are to note the name of your competitor, the outcome of the match and the details of any conversation engaged in during the match.
6. You must then repeat steps 3 through 5 until you have either played every operative in the room, or the allotted time for this assessment is complete (see step 7).
7. At 10.00pm exactly you must cease the match you are engaged in and make a note of which player is in an advantageous position.
8. Within the venue there is a painting, which is the work of a famous individual who has not obtained their fame for their artistic endeavors. Determine which painting and the identity of the artist before vacating the venue in an expedient manner.
9. Submit a report of your assignment (including a record of your winnings and losses, a brief transcript of all conversations and the identity of the famous painter) to the Operations Division (operations@neurocam.com) prior to close of business on Friday (date withheld for security reasons).

NOTE: You will be informed of the results of your assessment within two weeks of the submission of your report.

#### (D) OPERATIONAL SECURITY

Operatives are strictly forbidden from revealing any details pertaining to this assignment. Any

operative found doing so will suffer immediate expulsion from Neurocam.

Regards

Charles Hastings

Head, Operations Division

Neurocam International

If there was one thing I had truly come to love about Neurocam, it was their absolute lack of predictability. I felt enormous admiration for the person or people who had conjured up this incredibly bizarre and exciting new assignment. Now that I was looking at the possibility of Neurocam being some kind of artistic experiment or new type of art practice, I could see the creative possibilities inherent within these strange goings on. I was still unsure how I felt about being manipulated into participating in the first place, but I considered that this process might have been an integral part of the experience.

Aside from the fact that I would once again meet face to face with fellow operatives, this assignment was to be the first opportunity to meet with actual Neurocam Management. I wondered what they would be like and whether we would be able to talk to them about Neurocam. Their presence would probably make us slightly paranoid, as they would undoubtedly be tasked with monitoring our conduct. Perhaps attempting to strike up conversations about the cam would not be a wise move. The possibilities presented quite a quandary.

The premise of the assignment was ominous—Neurocam were going to cull some operatives and promote others. I wanted to be promoted more than anything as this would no doubt bring a whole new level to the experience, but I was frustrated that Neurocam hadn't told us exactly what they were looking for in terms of grounds for promotion. I thought it might be wrong to assume that the operatives who won the most games of chess would be first to be promoted



and hoped that this was the case as my chess playing skills were nothing special. I found it somewhat irritating that we had been expressly instructed not to talk *about* Neurocam while playing matches *for* Neurocam.

There was a distinct element of tension in this latest development as some of us would be cut off from an ongoing activity that had become an important part of our lives, while others would (rather exclusively) be taken to new heights. I thought about the idea of my Neurocam involvement reaching its conclusion and the idea was not an appealing one. Whatever kind of art or game experience this was I did not want it to end just yet. I guess it was like watching a really good movie or reading an engrossing novel. But the difference was that this was happening in real time and we would not be able to rewind or flick back to the beginning.

In the days before the career advancement suitability assessment I conversed with my Neurocam friends often via email and between us we found a local supplier of cheap white Japanese kabuki masks. During my lunch break one day I made a visit to this costume shop on Little Bourke Street and found that their supply of kabuki masks was rapidly dwindling. I asked the girl behind the counter and she said that it was really weird that after selling none of the masks for months, all of a sudden she had dozens of people wanting them in the last three3 days. When I got home that day I made the necessary adjustments to the mask as per Hastings' instructions in the last assignment—cutting off the chin section at the line of the upper lip. I thought it was clever how he had withheld this detail from the recent assignment brief, making sure that only those who had heard his recording at Bolte Bridge would know what to do. Trying on the mask made me feel like some strange member of a demented cult sect. I could only imagine what a room full of us would look like to the general public ... were we about to become a living, breathing part of someone's conceptual artwork?

A couple of days later I was looking at websites from some of Melbourne's art galleries and noticed that a gallery called West Space was advertising a 'live art event' which was limited to 10 participants per night. There was a brief write-up about the event, called "Strangers and

Intimacy"<sup>46</sup>, which explained how it was a collaboration between artists, performers and actors from Australia and the UK. The write-up didn't really say what the event would involve beyond touting it as 'an unforgettable evening not to be missed'. Never having been to a 'live art event' before I decided to sign up. I received a message back almost immediately saying that they could fit me in the following evening at seven, and to arrive at the address and wait outside. In preparation I brushed up on my art lingo and discovered an interesting definition of live art by UK artist Joshua Sofaer:

Live Art is when an artist chooses to make work directly in front of the audience in space and time. So instead of making an object, or an environment (a painting for example) and leaving it for the audience to encounter in their own time, Live Art comes into being at the actual moment of encounter between artist and spectator. Or at least even if they are not physically present, the artist sets up a situation in which the audience experience the work in a particular space and time, and the notion of 'presence' is key to the concerns of the work.<sup>47</sup>

I wasn't entirely sure how live art differed from performance art, but supposed it was to do with the way live art focussed more on the 'encounters' between artist and audience, implying a more direct kind of interaction. I was intrigued by Sofaer's mention of works where the artists would not be physically present, but would set up situations to be experienced by the audience. Wasn't this exactly what had been happening with Neurocam? I came across another ambitious description of what live art attempts to offer the audience:

Live Art offers immersive experiences, often disrupting distinctions between spectator and participant. Live Art asks us what it means to be here, now. In the simultaneity and interactivity of a media saturated society, Live Art is about immediacy and reality: creating spaces to explore the experience of things, the ambiguities of meaning and the responsibilities of our individual agency.<sup>48</sup>

If the distinctions between spectator and participant were being reinvented in the context of 'creating spaces to explore the experience of things', I wondered exactly what kind of art experience I was in for. Needless to say I was interested to see how "Strangers and Intimacy" related to some of the art I had heard about recently.

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<sup>46</sup> Alice Hui-sheng Chang et al, *Strangers and Intimacy*, 2005, Melbourne, Australia

<sup>47</sup> Sofaer, Joshua, "What Is Live Art?" [http://www.joshuasofaer.com/texts/exhibit\\_wila.html](http://www.joshuasofaer.com/texts/exhibit_wila.html) (accessed 21 July 2011).

<sup>48</sup> "What Is Live Art?", [http://www.thisisliveart.co.uk/about\\_us/what\\_is\\_live\\_art.html](http://www.thisisliveart.co.uk/about_us/what_is_live_art.html) (accessed 21 July 2011).

The following evening I arrived at the (locked) front door of West Space Gallery to see a small crowd of eight or nine people milling about. It seemed that some of them knew each other, but most had come alone. We chatted about the strangeness of being made to wait outside a gallery without knowing what was in store for us.

At some time after 7pm a window opened above us on the second floor and an attractive young woman leaned out and dropped a feather, which slowly drifted down towards us. A middle-aged woman caught the feather and while she was examining it the doors opened and another attractive young woman came out and led her back in the door and up the stairs, indicating that the rest of us were to remain outside. Another feather was dropped from above and the process repeated until all of us were eventually led up the stairs, through a series of completely empty rooms (which I assumed was the gallery space), and into a small cramped room at the back of the space.

Once we were all crammed inside the very small room the door was shut and locked and we were left there for several minutes. During this time we all sat down on the floor and made ourselves as comfortable as possible within the cramped confines. Some time later the lights were switched off and we were thrown into complete darkness, which was unsettling to say the least. If that was not enough to make us feel uncomfortable, extremely loud sounds began to issue from a small vent on the floor. The sounds were incredibly strange; somehow primordial and chaotic without any connection to anything obviously tangible. At best they could be described as demented wailing. The overall effect was extremely disarming, especially as it continued for at least 15 minutes. Being tightly packed into a room full of complete strangers didn't help matters, as I felt more than a little bit claustrophobic.

After what seemed like an eternity the sounds stopped and the lights came on. The door opened and another woman we had not seen before entered wearing some kind of maid's outfit carrying a birthday cake with several candles alight. She was singing happy birthday as she reached out and grabbed the hand of one of the audience members and led him out of the space. As she departed the room loud sounds issued from the adjacent room—people cheered

and whistles were blown as if a party was in full swing.

We were then led out by one by one by the cake-wielding woman. I took her hand and was taken to another room where a party was indeed in full swing. The room was now inhabited by twenty or so people all talking, laughing and drinking as if they were right at home in a familiar environment. As I was led through the crowd I was approached by a woman who seemed to know me, who introduced me by name to some of the people at the party, including the hosts. What followed was so utterly bizarre that I had absolutely no frame of reference or way of behaving that empowered me in any way. I was completely at the mercy of a bunch of professionals who knew exactly what they were doing. It was like being inside a play but not having any lines. Over the next two hours I witnessed drunken arguments, animated conversations about all manner of subjects and a tearful confession from a naked girl in the bathroom who told me that her boyfriend had just left her because she had cheated on him. I was also made to dance with a complete stranger and look her in the eye while telling her that I loved her.

When I got home that night I felt like I had experienced some kind of epiphany regarding contemporary art. Essentially I had just been to a gallery and seen some art, but to me the event had been infinitely more potent than anything I had ever encountered in a gallery situation before. I had just had *an experience*, and it had engaged me on several levels. I had been taken completely out of my comfort zone and had experienced a range of emotions, thoughts and ideas. The key to this amazing event had been the fact that its creators had managed to construct an entire reality through a series of brilliant interconnecting performances, which were seamlessly improvised to engage the participants every step of the way.

Strangers and Intimacy was like a combination of "Ivan's Dogs" and Maling's "Project George". It created a situation where the audience were in some ways forced to accept the reality around them, but the script could be adapted at any point to accommodate unpredictable deviations. An interesting aspect to this approach was that each participant had probably gone home with a different story to tell about the evening's events; only people who had needed to use the

bathroom would have encountered the naked crying woman, and while I was in there with her I probably missed all kinds of other things going on in other rooms.

My West Space experience had left me hyped for my upcoming Neurocam assignment. I had just experienced first hand what was now possible in the context of contemporary art, and was all but convinced that Neurocam was playing a similar game. They weren't doing it in an art gallery, but perhaps this did not matter. If I could be coerced into challenging situations within the seemingly 'safe' confines of an art gallery, then why couldn't this happen anywhere? In both cases I still had the option of opting out of proceedings at any time, but there was also a similar kind of manipulation at play which kept me motivated. I wasn't exactly being duped by either party, but they were certainly presenting their information in a somewhat selective way. "Strangers and Intimacy" had not at any point announced that they were artists or that the scenario was an artwork. I imagined that their performance would have worked equally well in another context completely removed from the art world if they had been able to somehow get an audience together. So was this the only real difference between Neurocam and "Strangers and Intimacy"—the way in which they gathered an audience and the types of venues they used?

I continued to investigate the emergence of a new type of art practice that seemed to alter the fabric of an audience's reality and attempted to trace these ideas back through recent art history. While performance art and happenings dated back to the sixties, live art was a term that was first used in the UK during the mid-eighties to describe new and existing works. Interestingly, the list of officially recognised 'live artists', such as Marina Abramovic, Vito Acconci, Laurie Anderson, Joseph Beuys, George Brecht, Stuart Brisley, Chris Burden, Gilbert and George, Tehching Hsieh, Paul McCarthy, Hermann Nitsch, Yoko Ono, Nam June Paik and Wolf Vostell dated back several years before the term was actually created to encompass a diverse range of performances and happenings. Unfortunately this had the effect of diluting the clarity of what I had considered to be catchy new terminology describing a unique genre.

In trying to find examples of live art not concerned with more traditional performance practices, I

came across an interesting work called “Snowdancing”<sup>49</sup> created by French artist Phillipe Parreno in 1995. Parreno had set up a party and everything that transpired during the 90-minute event became the artwork—clusters, conversations, awkwardness, and all. Some of the partygoers were acting under Parreno’s instructions and played certain key roles, creating a blurring of the line between reality and fiction as most participants were reacting spontaneously to the situation as it played out around them. This sounded very similar to “Strangers and Intimacy” and I wondered if it had been an influence. If this type of work had occurred over 10 years ago, I wondered if there was a solid tradition of this kind of live art practice. If so, I would have thought that I would have heard about it. I guess it was possible that it was simply not that popular and didn’t have much of a following. The other possibility was that it was operating more on an underground level, focusing entirely on the experiences themselves rather than publicity or documentation.

On the day of the assignment I was so excited that I was hopeless at work. Time dragged unbearably and I found myself zoning out often. My supervisor, who had been monitoring some of my calls, called me into her office and asked me if everything was OK. I wanted to tell her that I couldn’t concentrate because I had an appointment with some masked strangers to determine my fate within a strange organisation called Neurocam, but thought better of it. It would have been hugely ironic if I been sacked from my real life job and promoted with Neurocam. When work was finally over I had an hour to kill before my appointment with the cam and found myself distractedly wandering the streets with the cut-down white kabuki mask in my bag. I contemplated arriving at the location early, but didn’t want to risk anything that might compromise my promotional possibilities.

The venue was a bar on Victoria Street in North Melbourne called Prudence. As I approached I saw several people arrive wearing white masks and quickly put mine on. Thankfully I had widened the ill-placed eyeholes and could see through the mask quite well. A casually dressed man in his early-thirties wearing a similar (but more expensive) mask to mine with a curious logo on the forehead was standing by the door. He greeted me and asked for my identification. I

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<sup>49</sup> Phillipe Parreno, *Snowdancing*, 1995, Dijon, France.

thought this was odd and pulled out my wallet, thinking that he wanted to see my driver's license. "Your Neurocam ID" he said. I felt foolish, I had been so nervous that I had forgotten to put on my Neurocam Identity badge. I fished it out of my pocket and he ushered me through the door. So this was a bona fide member of Neurocam Management. He seemed very unapproachable so I didn't attempt to strike up a conversation. I wondered if I would recognise him in a crowd without his mask on and laughed to myself about Neurocam sending members of management on an assignment where we all happened to be conveniently wearing masks.

I brought myself a beer at the bar and headed upstairs. The bartender hadn't seemed at all phased about my mask and there were no unmasked customers around so I assumed that Neurocam had hired the entire venue for the evening. At the top of the stairs was a series of large interconnecting rooms, each with several tables and chessboards set up. Most of the tables were occupied with masked figures hunched low over their boards. I was met by a tall balding man in his late-thirties wearing a mask with the same strange logo, who ushered me impatiently to a seating area where a couple of other masked operatives were gathered. It was impossible to tell if any of the people from the Bolte Bridge assignment were present as every person in the room was wearing an almost identical mask.

I made polite conversation with the other operatives in the 'waiting room' and made a joke about the tall Neurocam guy who was standing at the top of the stairs. "Friendly fellow isn't he?" I said. The others appeared not to share my joke and looked sheepishly about. The tall guy came over and told us that there was a table free. I took this opportunity to challenge the operative beside me to a game of chess. His operative name was "Pale Figure", not someone who had been present at Bolte Bridge. I found it odd that he also had a cut-down mask like my own and wondered if Hastings had run another Bolte Bridge-style assignment with another batch of operatives, or if he had simply sent a different set of instructions. As we made our way to a table I noticed that there were about 50 people present, almost twice the number who had attended Bolte.

While I was engaged in a game of chess with operative "Pale Figure" I looked around the room

and was struck with the absolute strangeness of the situation. The décor was that of an old English mansion and several antique lamps cast subdued reddish light about the space. The light was caught on the smooth white faces of the masked figures all hunched low over their chessboards, deep in concentration. The little conversation about the room was a low murmur over a series of what sounded like old movie soundtracks being played on an ancient stereo system. In terms of art direction, the setup reminded me of a famous scene in Stanley Kubrick's 1999 film "Eyes Wide Shut"<sup>50</sup> in which Tom Cruise's character happens on a mysterious gathering of masked men who are part of a secret organisation set up as a kind of Masonic Brotherhood dedicated to extravagant and illicit pleasures. Cruise's character is exposed as he does not follow the correct protocols of one of their 'meetings'.

As far as I could tell, the only Neurocam Management Personnel present were the guy on the door and the guy at the top of the stairs.

The evening wore on and I lost some games and won some games. At one point the tall Neurocam guy took a phone call which my opponent and I both overheard, explaining that he was "... at this Neurocam thing ... oh it's quite the story, mate ... it goes back, like, a year ... Graham got me into it ...". As he was obviously distracted I looked at the girl opposite me, operative Constance, and asked her, "Do you really think he's Management?" Constance gave me a 'cut' signal by running her hand in front of her neck in a chopping motion and shook her head. I gathered that she didn't want to risk talking about Neurocam.

Shortly before 10pm I remembered the other part to the assignment—to identify the painting. I wandered through the rooms and looked at the four or five paintings on the walls. A few other operatives were looking at the paintings as well and seemed to be gathered around one in particular, a painting of the seven dwarves by JW Gacy. I overheard a discussion about JW being John Wayne as in John Wayne Gacy the infamous serial killer. I wrote this down and left the building. I had won one game of chess with operative "Pale Figure" and lost two games to operatives "Constance" and "Midnight". I sincerely hoped that my Neurocam involvement would

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<sup>50</sup> Stanley Kubrick, "Eyes Wide Shut," (USA: 1999).



not be compromised by my lousy chess performance. It struck me that Neurocam could have had several management members present, all participating in chess games to monitor operatives' conduct. But why chess? Was this an analogy for the complex game Neurocam was playing with us?

All in all it had been a very strange evening as I had interacted with several people without having what I would call a real conversation. The atmosphere of the event had been one of mystery, intrigue and tension—elements obviously carefully controlled by Neurocam. Having actual Neurocam personnel present had been disappointing for me, as I couldn't help thinking that they seemed to be very much like operatives who might have been higher up the food chain and merely carrying out different assignments. It occurred to me that if some of us were promoted we might find ourselves in a similar position and be given assignments where we facilitated events for other operatives. If this were the case, I wondered who the 'real' management were and how many promotions it would take to actually meet them. I found it vaguely distasteful that this was set up as a kind of hierarchy where it implied a sense of status to be rubbing shoulders with Neurocam's upper management. I thought about what I would do if given such a position of power. Would it be satisfying to have this higher status and subsequent power and control over others? Would this be another test?

I considered the possibility of the evening's events being part of a live art project and could definitely see similarities to the work of "Ivan's Dogs", "Strangers and Intimacy", "Project George" and "Snowdancing". The main difference was that Neurocam was still at this point operating in a more mysterious and removed way; we had yet to have any real contact with the puppet masters or understand fully what their agenda was. Also, the narrative construct was more elaborate and seemed to span over a far longer time frame than the one-off performances of similar works. I decided to dig deeper while I waited impatiently for the outcomes of the career advancement assessment.

While trawling the net I came across a link to a very interesting interactive performance project staged in Adelaide during 2004 by UK artists collective Blast Theory. The project, entitled "I like

Frank”<sup>51</sup>, used 3G mobile phones and a central website to engage an audience in tracking down a man named Frank. The project explored the intersection of real and virtual spaces in much the same way as alternate reality games. Players interfacing with a virtual representation of the city were able to figure out clues and text them to people in the streets.

“I like Frank” reminded me of the Bolte Bridge assignment where we had worked as a team to solve a narrative based puzzle in much the same way as players in an ARG context. It was interesting that Blast Theory considered themselves to be a ‘performance art collective’ when this project was almost identical to some ARGs. After reading all about the project on their website, I couldn’t help thinking that the project was unsuccessful in terms of testing the boundaries of this kind of hybrid space within an art context. The artists relied too heavily on gaming strategies and pre-determined modes of engagement, which led to a relatively predictable and overly safe experience for participants. There was also the question of motivation. If Neurocam had presented itself as a kind of heavily monitored hybrid art project which one could sign up to participate in, I don’t think I would have bothered. Neurocam seemed to have an edge in that it was not contextualised in any obvious way, but was it art or some kind of subversive experiment that had nothing to do with performance art or live art practice? Strangely, this uncertainty was what made it so appealing.

Another work with similarities to Neurocam that I uncovered was artist and filmmaker Miranda July’s web based work “Learning to Love You More”<sup>52</sup> that was launched in 2002. July engaged an audience by posting ‘assignments’ on her website which were completed by participants who documented the results and uploaded them on the site. The assignment idea was strikingly similar to Neurocam and participation relied on a sense of community created by the participants themselves. I had also never heard of any other artwork (other than perhaps Neurocam) that required an audience to actually go out and do stuff, which was quite a commitment in itself. I was really excited about the possibilities inherent within July’s work as I imagined that in getting her audience to independently participate in doing things offline, they

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<sup>51</sup> Blast Theory, *I Like Frank*, 2004, Adelaide, Australia

<sup>52</sup> Miranda July, *Learning to Love You More*, 2002 - present.

would no doubt get to have 'experiences' that might alter their perceptions in some way, much like with Neurocam. I made a note of some of her assignments for my records:

Interview someone who has experienced war.  
 Record the sound that is keeping you awake.  
 Make a portrait of your friend's desires.  
 Give advice to yourself in the past.  
 Re-enact a scene from a movie that made someone else cry.  
 Make an exhibition of the art in your parent's house.  
 Act out someone else's argument.  
 Ask your family to describe what you do.  
 Make a protest sign and protest.  
 Spend time with a dying person.  
 Curate an artist's retrospective in a public place.  
 Recreate an object from someone's past.  
 Make a documentary video about a small child.<sup>53</sup>

July's work certainly encouraged participants to engage with the project in a creative way and had attracted over eight-thousand participants over its seven-year lifespan. Although "Learning to Love You More" also used the structure of assignments to facilitate audience participation, it did not have any over-arching theme or narrative like Neurocam or like a game.

At this point the only thing all of the works I had been researching had in common was the relationship between artist and audience; these situations had been set up to make the focus of the work the actual participants themselves, not the actions, props or art direction from the artists/performers. Also, these projects did not seem to be documented. I had searched for many hours on the Internet and had not been able to find video, photographs or anything more than brief textual descriptions of the works. As far as I could tell, this represented a radically different way of looking at art, which was ephemeral and not based around object-based outcomes or even extensive documentation.

During the next week I had my appointment to see Jason Maling's creation "The Vorticist", which turned out to be in a small, sparsely furnished room at the Abbotsford Convent. Maling himself, who was wearing a very smart looking blue velvet waistcoat and tie, met me at the gates. He led me through the grand old buildings regaling me with tales of their history as a nunnery. It seemed that the convent was now being used mainly as artists' studios. Once inside

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<sup>53</sup> Miranda July, *Learning to Love You More*, 2002 - present.

his room, Maling sat me down next to a small table covered in the same blue velvet as his waistcoat upon which sat an assortment of strange equipment. We chatted at length about a range of topics and I had the sense that Maling was always cleverly directing the conversation into areas in which he had control over the content or stories to tell. We talked a lot about UFOs and ghosts, which is not something I am usually conversant with.

After a while he opened a box on the table, which contained a set of brass spinning tops of various sizes. He set up a piece of blue carbon copy paper under a sheet of thin drawing paper on top of a marble slate and asked me to spin the tops on the paper. Not knowing what to do, I randomly selected various tops and spun them randomly on the paper. The copy paper left traces of fine lines underneath the translucent drawing paper, which were visible from above. When I had returned all of the tops to their box Maling removed the top layer of paper and rolled it up using a very old looking rod that he said belonged to his great grandfather. He bound it with some blue velvet and presented it to me, telling me it was mine to keep. Underneath where the paper had been was a beautiful blue layer of copy paper, which had inscribed the inverse of the drawing I had made on it. Maling said that this was his copy and that he would make notes on our 'appointment'. He showed me a book that contained numerous blue drawings next to meticulous notes about the conversations he'd had with what he referred to as his 'subjects'.

On the way home from the strange meeting I reflected on how the experience could be considered art and what kind of art it was in relation to some of the works I had recently participated in and read about. I had made a drawing, but I had the feeling that was not the point of the exercise, or the artwork. I thought more about the strange conversation we'd had and it dawned on me that perhaps this was the work. If a conversation could be art then I was sure that Neurocam's activities could also be art. But I was still uncertain. Even though Neurocam could plausibly be a work of art, it was still entirely possible that it had nothing to do with art and was simply an incredibly elaborate marketing campaign for some kind of gaming company.

## Chapter 6: Meeting Charles Hastings

In the days that followed my meeting with “The Vorticist” I became increasingly agitated about the impending results of the career advancement assignment. After two weeks I began to think that no contact from Neurocam might mean that I had been cut adrift. The sense of loss I felt about possibly not having Neurocam in my life anymore made me realise how much the experience meant to me. I checked in with my Neurocam friends and none of them had heard from Neurocam either, which made me feel slightly better. It was extremely frustrating not having been told what the timeframe for possible promotions might be; our assignments had always been regular as clockwork, but this was a different situation and once again we were at Neurocam’s mercy. Part of me felt angry and annoyed at this constant power imbalance—Neurocam were always in control and there was nothing we could do about it.

During this unbearable waiting period I kept myself occupied with many hours on the Internet attempting to join together the many dots of random information pertaining to a possible explanation of *what* Neurocam actually was. With a clear image in mind of a bunch of people all wearing identical white kabuki masks and playing chess in a local bar, I came across an interesting reference to a phenomenon called “Flash Mobs”. “Flash Mobs” were created in New York during 2003 by Bill Wasik, and are described by him as “a public gathering of complete strangers, organized via the Internet or mobile phone, which performs a pointless act and then disperses again.”<sup>54</sup>

The idea had spread rapidly throughout the US and then internationally to many major cities around the world. Examples of recorded “Flash Mob” events include shopping for a ‘love rug’ for a fictitious commune, silent discos where participants gather and dance while listening to music on headphones, pillow fights, synchronised swimming in public fountains, gathering in hotel lobbies and cheering onlookers. I read of a hilarious account of a “Flash Mob” in Melbourne CBD, where hundreds of people had appeared out of nowhere and started a mock shoot-out

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<sup>54</sup> Wasik, Bill, “My Crowd, or Phase 5: A Report from the Inventor of the Flash Mob.” <http://www.harpers.org/archive/2006/03/0080963> (accessed 8 April 2010).

wielding bananas, before disappearing minutes later into the crowds.

While the actions played out by the crowds in Wasik's "Flash Mobs" didn't appear to have any obvious socio-political agenda, Nick Tapper in an article for *The New Critic* points out that:

Seeing how all culture in New York was demonstrably commingled with scenesterism, the appeal of concerts and plays and readings and gallery shows deriving less from the work itself than from the social opportunities the work might engender, it should theoretically be possible to create an art project consisting of pure scene—meaning the scene would be the entire point of the work, and indeed would itself constitute the work.<sup>55</sup>

So Wasik appeared to be facilitating a process where a form of social interaction created unique and temporary works of art where the people themselves become the show, and in a sense, create something which is entirely experiential. I wasn't convinced that Wasik was creating art, as the idea seemed more aligned with experiments in social networking than the construction of artworks involving a radical new approach to audience participation. Also, Wasik did not claim at any point to be an artist and often said in interviews that he created "Flash Mobs" because he thought they were funny. It was possible however that the very existence of "Flash Mobs" could be challenging art's boundaries in light of what people were doing with live art and conceptual art, where the work focuses on a performance, action or event rather than a tangible permanent outcome.

All the same, the similarities to some of Neurocam's recent activities couldn't be ignored. Neurocam was indeed similarly organising groups of people to participate in public acts for no obvious reason other than curiosity or a need to be part of something. The difference was that Neurocam's public participatory acts were not random or pointless to those involved; they were part of a narrative trajectory. It could be said however that these acts were *completely* random and pointless to an outside audience. I thought of what the general public would have made of the treasure hunt at Bolte Bridge and the masked chess tournament at Prudence. I also wondered if Neurocam's overall narrative trajectory, if there was one, could be just as random

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<sup>55</sup> Nick Tapper, "Me and You and Everyone We Know: The Aesthetics of Joining In," *The New Critic*, no. 2 (2006). <http://www.ias.uwa.edu.au/new-critic/two/meyouandeveryone> (accessed 4 March 2009).

or pointless as the Wasik's one-liners. This was a strangely uncomfortable thought. What if I had wasted considerable amounts of my time on something completely pointless?

I questioned what would make people want to participate in "Flash Mobs". In an (online) interview with Stay Free magazine, Wasik says that:

People have been spending a lot of time in virtual communities since the Internet took off, and I think people liked the flash mobs because they had an Internet component, yet allowed you to see this virtual community made literal and physical.<sup>56</sup>

This was an interesting idea as it pretty much mirrored what was happening with my Neurocam experience on a smaller scale. I now had online friends who were loosely part of what Wasik was calling a 'virtual community'. We were like a club with one thing in common—Neurocam participation. The group assignments were hugely appealing because we also got to see the virtual world of Neurocam played out in the physical world. The only thing missing however, were some of the virtual players in our community such as Mr Hastings and Ms Fischer. But it was early days and there was no telling what might be in store if I was promoted.

A word that had been cropping up often in my research into the idea of "Flash Mobs" and virtual communities was 'meme'. According to Wikipedia:

A meme consists of any idea or behavior that can pass from one person to another by learning or imitation. Examples include thoughts, ideas, theories, gestures, practices, fashions, habits, songs, and dances. Memes propagate themselves and can move through the cultural sociosphere in a manner similar to the contagious behavior of a virus.<sup>57</sup>

Apparently Richard Dawkins invented the word 'meme' in his book "The Selfish Gene"<sup>58</sup> (1976) to describe how one might extend evolutionary principles to explain the spread of ideas and cultural phenomena. Wasik's "Flash Mobs" were the perfect example of a 'meme' in the way they started off purely as an idea and then spread rapidly through the Internet, like a virus. Wasik

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<sup>56</sup> Francis Heaney, "The Short Life of Flash Mobs," *Stay Free*.  
<http://www.ibiblio.org/pub/electronic-publications/stay-free/archives/24/flash-mobs-history.html>  
 (accessed 14 January 2010).

<sup>57</sup> "Wikipedia".

<sup>58</sup> Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene*, 2 ed. ed.(Oxford University Press, 1989).

says in another interview that:

... the whole meme-making thing is weird. I have friends who basically make memes for a living--for art projects that involve spreading ideas through the Internet. But things spread for reasons that are unknown to all of us.<sup>59</sup>

I found the idea of a new breed of artists spreading ideas across the Internet absolutely fascinating. It made sense that the web was radically changing the way information was accessed and propagated, but it was amazing to think that people, even artists, were specialising in this area. Certainly "Flash Mobs" had countless forums and chat rooms all over the web, which were propagating the idea like a virus. I wondered what would happen to Neurocam if the veil of secrecy were removed and people all over the World started blogging about their Neurocam experiences. If this happened I would certainly be excited about the opportunity to share my findings with the Neurocam community and would strive towards being the first person to get to the bottom of the mystery. Outside of the Internet it was entirely possible that Neurocam had already become a meme; it was ostensibly a kind of theory, set of ideas or way of thinking that was spreading across the cultural landscape of our society. I wondered how many thousands of people all around the world might be involved and how many Neurocam-related emails were pinging back and fourth through cyberspace. If we, the participants, were making Neurocam what it is, then it was likely that there were considerably more of us than we imagined.

Several days later I finally received my much anticipated email from Mr Hastings. To my dismay, his message did not shed any light whatsoever as to whether or not I was to be promoted. This was extremely frustrating after waiting so long to hear back from them. Hastings merely ordered that I show up at Darling Gardens in Clifton Hill the following night. I was to wait by a rotunda at precisely 11pm, which I thought was rather late for me on a weeknight and altogether somewhat ominous. Although it was good news that I had heard from Neurocam, I was somewhat taken aback by this latest development. Meeting persons unknown in a park in the middle of the night

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<sup>59</sup> Thomas Marchbank, "Intense Flows: Flashmobbing, Rush Capital and the Swarming of Space," *Philament, an online journal of the arts and culture*, no. 4. [http://www.arts.usyd.edu.au/publications/philament/issue4\\_Critique\\_Marchbank.htm](http://www.arts.usyd.edu.au/publications/philament/issue4_Critique_Marchbank.htm) (accessed 4 March 2009).



was significantly increasing my level of commitment and trust to worrying proportions. I felt strangely manipulated by Neurocam—they had put me in a position where I had become so obsessed and so worried about being cut off that I would do practically anything they asked of me. Still, I guessed that if I wanted to get the most out of whatever kind of experience this was, I would simply have to continue to follow orders. Part of me also wanted to expose them once and for all, and I knew that the only chance I had of doing this was to continue my involvement.

That night I came across a reference to a project that had happened before “Flash Mobs” became popular, which was dealing with similar themes in a far more sophisticated way. In 2001 Tim Etchells—in collaboration with the Huddersfield Media Centre in the UK—had developed a project called “Surrender Control”<sup>60</sup> where anonymous SMS messages instructed participants to engage in bizarre behaviour. Participants were recruited into the project via a catchy marketing campaign using flyers in bars and magazine ads which asked, “Do you want to surrender control?” and listed a phone number. Those who responded with a text message stating “yes” were then inducted into the project and sent a series of SMS messages beginning with innocuous questions such as, “What did you do last night?” and escalating to demanding participation in physical actions like knocking things over, breaking things and touching two people at the same time. At the conclusion of a participant’s involvement they were given a message asking them to forget everything they had experienced.

In an online article discussing “Surrender Control”, BBC Go Digital’s Jon Wurtzel says that:

With this project, The Media Centre aims to disrupt the patterns and routines of urban behavior with the random and unexpected. If you are on a train, following the instruction to touch two people at the same time will have a different implication than if you're in a business meeting. Surrender Control provides an excuse to escape routine, to behave differently.<sup>61</sup>

This struck me as being uncannily similar to Neurocam in terms of the project’s overall objectives. I thought about some of the unusual ways I had been behaving over the past few

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<sup>60</sup> Tim Etchells, *Surrender Control*, 2001.

<sup>61</sup> Jon Wurtzel, “Surrender Control to Your Mobile,” (2001).  
<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/science/nature/1600165.stm> (accessed 28 April 2009).

months—retrieving objects from safes and train station lockers, searching for missing items with a group of total strangers, stalking random members of the public and playing masked chess. These unusual activities had certainly provided an excuse to escape routine and behave differently, and receiving my instructions via email was not dissimilar to Etchells' SMS delivery. Neurocam was indeed also disrupting patterns and routines of urban behaviour with the random and unexpected, but to what end? The Media Centre seemed to view this process as an end result in itself, much like Wasik's "Flash Mobs", but was Neurocam simply another clever one-liner? "Surrender Control" was probably the most similar type of project to Neurocam that I had come across so far, as Etchells had constructed an actual dialogue with his participants in which a kind of relationship of trust was formed. Wasik was simply ordering people to carry out single, unrelated acts, but Etchells was starting off with questions, gradually upping the anti and daring participants to go further and further away from their comfort zones. "Surrender Control" also had the additional impact of participants working individually rather than in the safety of a group situation. The completely anonymous nature of Etchells' project was something that I had only ever seen with Neurocam.

So, was Neurocam just an elaborate media artsy project? Although it was entirely likely that an organisation like The Media Centre in the UK could be running Neurocam, part of me wanted to believe that there was infinitely more to it. Besides, after looking into the workings of media arts organisations, I really didn't think that they would have the extensive funding available to run such large-scale international projects, especially with no source of generated revenue or even promotional opportunities. Once again I found myself facing the usual question—if Neurocam wasn't a media arts project, then what was it? My mind wandered off into some of the more extreme possibilities such as a government conspiracy to gather information and control its citizens, or a bizarre psychology experiment funded by some excessively wealthy drug company. It seemed that almost anything was possible at this stage.

The following day at work I was nervous and distracted. I couldn't stop thinking about my strange appointment that night and what it might entail. I had a strong feeling that something was about to happen which would significantly impact on my Neurocam involvement. To while away the

dragging hours I surreptitiously browsed the Internet in my seemingly never-ending quest for answers. While looking further into the idea of audience participation within some of the new kinds of interactive projects I had been looking at, I came across an interesting interview with media arts curator Rudolf Frieling talking about a 2005 show at San Francisco Museum of Modern Art entitled "The Art of Participation". The show was essentially a showcasing of participatory artworks from the 1950s until today featuring many famous artists from the art historical archives. Frieling, in an attempt to shed light on some of the more obscure works in the show, says that:

We know what it means to participate in politics or school, and sometimes know what it means to participate in a work of art if we get clear instructions. However there are some projects where it is unclear what exactly is asked of you, or you can only find out by actually doing something. The work requires your input and your act of contribution.<sup>62</sup>

Participating in works where one can only find out about the nature of engagement by actually doing something was an idea that resonated strongly for me in light of recent events. Again I came back to the idea that Neurocam might be a project positioned more in the realms of contemporary art than the more general genre of media arts. While Frieling was talking about works such as Erwin Wurm's "One Minute Sculptures"<sup>63</sup> where participants have to interact with everyday objects to create impromptu sculptures with their bodies, the essence of this idea seemed to be a key to understanding my Neurocam experience. Assuming that Neurocam was an interactive artwork, it was true that the terms of engagement were unclear in spite of receiving what seemed on the surface a clear set of instructions. It followed that the nature of my experience was to be determined by me actually completing the tasks I was set. And also, Neurocam, much like Wurm's sculptures, required the input and contribution of participants to *become* a complete work. It now seemed obvious to me—Neurocam needed us operatives to exist. Considering this, I felt better about what I was about to do that evening. I was still however a little confused about the idea of a work that, unlike all other examples I had seen, did not seem to have a fixed point of conclusion or resolution. When was Neurocam complete?

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<sup>62</sup> Rudolf Frieling, "The Art of Participation " <http://blog.sfmoma.org/tag/erwin-wurm/> (accessed 28 April 2009).

<sup>63</sup> Erwin Wurm, *One Minute Sculptures*, 1980.

Freiling went on to discuss the idea of “open works of art” which went some way towards answering my questions about the open-ended nature of Neurocam. He states that:

The idea of “the open work of art” goes back to a 1962 book by Umberto Eco, in which he reflects on developments within contemporary art and music where the results of the artwork were not predefined, but rather could change over time, or change by interpretation. He said, in the whole history of art, the act of looking is a kind of interpretation; it’s always different and each one of us sees art in a different way.<sup>64</sup>

Saying that each of us sees (or interprets) art in different ways was somewhat obvious, but the idea of a work with no predefined outcomes that could change over time was very interesting. Did Neurocam really not have a fixed point of conclusion? Events thus far suggested that our Neurocam experiences had been meticulously scripted by Neurocam’s puppet masters, although there was obviously considerable room for our interpretation within this process. In terms of my own interpretation of Neurocam as a possible artwork, my ideas had most definitely changed over time as I had encountered new things. So far I had been playing by Neurocam’s rules as they had strongly urged, with the threat of dismissal, but I wondered how things would have played out if I had not done so. Would they have simply thrown me out? Even if I had been dismissed from their organisation, that would have constituted an ending of sorts, a fixed point of conclusion to the experience of the work. This reminded me again of “Strangers and Intimacy”, and how each person who attended their live artwork would have gone home with a different story to tell.

It occurred to me that Neurocam may *not* have expected us to blindly play along with everything they asked of us; that they might be frantically scurrying around behind the scenes trying to come up with new material for us every week. I had no idea who was at the controls, how many of them there were, or what kind of resources they had at their disposal. I had always assumed that they had been working on a large scale and unlimited timeline, but I had no real evidence to base this on. The latest development within the narrative certainly suggested that things might be reaching their conclusion for a lot of participants. I hoped I wasn’t one of them and I hoped that the people behind Neurocam weren’t getting to the end of whatever it was they had been working on. I had become somehow emotionally invested in

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<sup>64</sup> Frieling.

whatever it was they were creating and I didn't want it to end.

On the whole I found the interview with Frieling rather thought provoking, but I had to remind myself that however radical some of the ideas he discussed were, he was still operating well within the institutional confines of an art museum:

In this exhibition, we're interested in ways people can contribute to a work not only by looking—but also by interacting, participating in a group dynamic, or contributing to an artwork. We go, in other words, beyond the viewer.<sup>65</sup>

I could understand what he was getting at with the idea of participatory group dynamics shaping the outcomes of a work, but I wasn't quite sure what he meant by the (rather pretentious) statement about going “beyond the viewer”. Obviously an approach to experiencing art that involved hands-on participation took the audience beyond the usual (passive) relationship with an art object, but to what end? Were they temporarily losing themselves in the work? The ‘viewer’ still knew that they were in an art context and that they were expected to interact with the work in some way. Even the title of the show Frieling was talking about made this rather obvious. I considered many of the art exhibitions I had seen where the audience always assumed that interaction was not an option. The somewhat precious nature of art in galleries or art museums always made me resist my instincts to experience what a material felt like, or play around with the arrangement of exhibited objects. What if some of these artists had been open to an interactive experience with their work, but had simply not advertised the fact? With art projects like Maling's “Project George” and “Strangers and Intimacy”, interaction was not so much a choice, rather something that the audience was forced to confront. The only way to not interact in these situations would have been to leave the premises, but I guess even that would have resulted in an experience of sorts.

One of the works in “The Art of Participation” that I found conceptually interesting was a piece called “Automatic for the People”<sup>66</sup>, staged by New York artist duo MTAA. MTAA staged a

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> MTAA, *Automatic for the People*, 2005, San Francisco.

performance that was entirely designed by the audience through a ballot process where people voted on each of 10 details making up the work—the location, props, duration etc. Frieling proposed that this work was significant within the theme of the show because it, “...deliberately blurs the roles of artist and audience, creator and viewer.”<sup>67</sup>

This was a new take on interactive performance works in which the audience had (some) creative control over the outcomes of the actual work. Here, the work was still shaped by the audience, but they were also controlling the situation. What if I were to take this approach with Neurocam and start manipulating events myself? Was this even possible?

“Automatic for the People” reminded me of a work I had read about recently entitled “Chris Barr is available on Thursday”<sup>68</sup>, where American media studies student Chris Barr launched a project during 2005 in which ideas for events, actions and situations were submitted by the public to be carried out by Barr himself every Thursday for two months. He then documented these events and posted them on the project website. Among the hundreds of tasks he carried out over this period, some examples were:

Visiting someone who lived in a nursing home who wanted someone to talk to.  
Finding poems by female poets, photocopying them and posting them in male restrooms.  
Taking a walk wearing two different shoes.  
Composing a letter to the FBI, requesting his FBI file.

Although this was not framed as an art project, what struck me about Barr’s experiment was the way in which full creative license was given over to the general public, essentially allowing them to put him in any situation they chose. There appeared to be no obvious links between Barr’s assigned tasks, although they seemed to be vaguely associated with disrupting social norms. Unlike MTAA’s work where the audience were limited to a set number of options on which to vote, Barr’s work opened up the possibility of random members of the public giving him ‘assignments’, which would potentially challenge him in all kinds of ways. I found it fascinating to

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<sup>67</sup> Frieling.

<sup>68</sup> Chris Barr, *Chris Bar Is Available on Thursday*, Interactive public performance 2005, Buffalo, NY, USA.

think that his audience could place him in situations that they themselves could conceive of but (presumably) never actually go through with. It made me think of the assignments Neurocam was giving us and who was actually writing them. Barr's work seemed somehow like the inverse of projects like Neurocam or Miranda July's "Learning to Love You More" in that it involved assignments being created by the audience and given to the artist, rather than vice versa. Interestingly, the work was still just as dependent on audience participation and would not have survived without it. It brought to mind the fundamental question I was grappling with at present in relation to this type of art practice—who is ultimately responsible for the creation of the work, the artist(s) or the audience? Frieling seemed to be correct in his premise that these kinds of works were indeed blurring the roles between artist and audience, creator and viewer, creating a re-working of these distinctions.

After several hours of immersing myself in researching interactive art projects when I should have been working, I felt more confused than ever about what was happening in the art world these days, what could be considered art, and the ever-changing role of the audience. I set off home in need of a glass of wine and some mindless television viewing before my nefarious late-night rendezvous with the cam.

Later that evening I arrived at the dimly lit Darling Gardens wielding a takeaway coffee and made my way to the small rotunda in the centre of the area. As I grew closer I noticed a man. He was in his early-thirties and looked as if he was waiting for someone. I introduced myself and discovered that he was also a Neurocam operative waiting for something to happen. He seemed just as nervous as I was, and perhaps because of this, willing to talk about his Neurocam involvement. His operative name was "Tript" and he had been with Neurocam for about a year and had completed several assignments, the latest being the masked chess tournament at Prudence. We speculated about what the night may have had in store for us and assessed the potential risk we were taking. I told him about my theory that Neurocam was some new kind of narrative-based experimental art project and he seemed to disagree with this idea, saying that he thought Neurocam was most likely some kind of television initiative like an

urban version of “Survivor”<sup>69</sup>, and that we would most likely end up on some reality TV show. I asked him if this was what was motivating him and he said “No”, it was simply “...one hell of a ride and he wasn’t ready to get off yet”. We both agreed that an organisation with billboards in major cities around the world was not likely to represent anything harmful or untoward, but I sensed that during that moment in time neither of us were entirely convinced.

As if precisely on cue, our conversation was interrupted by the arrival of two cars outside the park. Six black-clad figures emerged wearing black kabuki masks and began making their way towards us. “Tript” and I looked at each other, he whispered urgently, “Should we run?” Rooted to the spot with indecision, we were soon surrounded by the black figures, who seemed to be wearing some kind of strange insignia on the foreheads of their masks. One of them, who may have been the leader, greeted us curtly and told us that we were going on a trip to a secret location and that we would have to agree to being blindfolded before undertaking this journey. He said that we could choose not to go, but if we did, our Neurocam involvement would be over and we would never hear from them again.

I could simply walk away and it would all be over, or I could take a massive leap of faith and let myself be swept up in whatever was about to happen. I felt as if my entire Neurocam experience had been leading up to this moment and it was impossible to walk away, in spite of being absolutely terrified. The ‘leader’ told us that we didn’t have all night and asked if we were coming. I made eye contact with “Tript” and he nodded and I nodded back. The cliché ‘safety in numbers’ echoed somewhere in the recesses of my consciousness. The masked figures produced two large paper shopping bags and placed them roughly over our heads, blocking out the night. As we were led to the waiting vehicles, I kept thinking of “Ivan’s Dogs” while I clutched my still scalding hot coffee.

Inside whatever car I was led into, strange music started up on the stereo as the driver turned on the ignition. It was some kind of meditation mantra mixed with techno beats. It was hypnotic. None of the other people in the car said a word as we sped through the streets to our

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<sup>69</sup> Burnett, Mark, "Survivor." 2000.



mysterious destination. I found it quite surreal that I was essentially being abducted in the middle of the night by a bunch of scary people in black masks and was at this moment being driven around with a bag over my head. I wondered why other motorists weren't calling the police and how they could get away with this sort of thing.

After what seemed like about half an hour of driving we pulled over and I was led out of the car and put into another car. The new car was a bigger vehicle, a 4WD diesel or something, and they had some kind of industrial soundscape playing on the stereo that produced the visceral equivalent of fingers raking down a blackboard. The roads we were travelling on seemed to become rougher and I spilled hot coffee onto my lap, which, had I not been distracted by the unfolding of my own abduction, would have probably been quite painful. After about another half hour of numerous twists and turns the car finally pulled over and I was led, still clutching my takeaway coffee, into the night.

I had absolutely no idea where we might be, but noticed that it was very quiet. No traffic or pedestrians. I was then led up some steps, through a door into what seemed like a very large and musty-smelling space, and up two flights of stairs. Progress up the stairs was extremely slow and I managed to spill even more of my now cold coffee all over myself. I could hear "Tript" fumbling his way up each step ahead of me. Eventually our guides became frustrated with our laborious progress and began to guide each foot to the next step for us. This sped things up considerably and we soon reached the top of the stairs and were led through a series of echoing corridors into what sounded like a large cavernous space. Eerie music could be heard from an adjoining room as we were made to stand facing what seemed to be a bright light. A deep muffled voice in front of us instructed us to remove our bags.

Blinking to adjust to the light I could make out a desk in front of us with a very bright desk lamp shining directly into our eyes. A tall heavy-set figure emerged from behind the light and stood, silhouetted, in front of us. He appeared to be wearing a stocking over his head with bandages from nose to chin and a small slit cut where his mouth would be. Protruding from this slit was a lit cigarette, the effect of which was more than a little sinister. In his peculiar deep muffled voice

with a slight English accent he greeted us and introduced himself as Charles Hastings, Director of Operations. At this point I almost dropped my coffee, as after all this time Hastings had become a kind of legend, and to see him in person was really quite overwhelming.

Hastings apologised for the unorthodox means by which we had been brought to him and told us that it was a necessary precaution. He then congratulated us on both being selected for promotion and pointed out that we must now undergo some formalities in order to be officially inducted into our new roles. The first of these formalities was to be a short message via live web link from Neurocam's Director, Ms Bridget Fischer. My heart leapt in my chest, after all these months of mystery, things were happening so fast. Some of the masked figures opened a sleek-looking laptop on the desk and Hastings motioned for us to come closer so we could clearly see the screen. The desk light was then switched off so all we could see was a Neurocam logo filling the screen. The logo dissolved into a video window in which an Afro-American woman in her mid-forties wearing a dark grey suit and white kabuki mask was regarding us. Her mask bore the same strange insignia, a bit like a squid, that the others all had. She appeared to be sitting at a desk in a high-rise office with a spectacular night view of some extremely large city behind her.

Ms Fischer greeted us in a thick Midwestern American accent and also congratulated us on being promoted, something she mentioned happened to less than one percent of all entry-level operatives around the world. She then gave a brief speech about the need for total commitment to the project as well as complete confidentiality. She said that before we could officially begin our work as 'inducted operatives', we would have to sign an official contract.

The lights flicked back on and Hastings' team produced hefty contracts and pens for us and we were told that we had to initial each page and sign on the last page. The contents of the contracts were steeped in dense corporate jargon almost impossible to decipher. I was so taken aback by the situation that I found it very difficult to read the very small print on the sixty or so pages. I dutifully initialled each page and signed on the dotted line, as did "Tript". All the while Ms Fischer was watching us from her high-rise office via the Internet. When we had

finished and Hastings had collected our contracts, Ms Fischer congratulated us again and told us that she looked forward to working with us. She signed off and the screen blinked back to the Neurocam logo.

Hastings then gave us a convoluted speech about the important work that was being undertaken by Neurocam and how it was only possible with people like us on board. I had no idea what he was talking about and was more confused than ever. After his speech he produced two neatly wrapped packages the size of a shoebox from the desk and told us that we were not to open them until we were in total privacy. He said that the contents of the packages were of the utmost importance and would show us the way to proceed. At this point he asked us if we had any questions and, completely intimidated, we both shook our heads dumbly and muttered “No”. Hastings then bid us “Farewell and Godspeed!” then strode briskly out of the room.

Our bags were placed back on our heads and we were led out of the building, ushered back into the cars and driven back to where we had been picked up what seemed like a lifetime ago. Our Neurocam escorts instructed that we not remove the bags until at least a minute after they had departed, which I suspected was to make sure we didn’t see their licence plates.

Once they had gone, “Tript” and I removed the bags and stared at each other in amazement. “Tript” was first to speak and said that that had undoubtedly been one of the most fucked up nights of his life. I had to agree. I noticed that by now almost all of my coffee was on my trousers and not in its cup and wondered why I been holding it all this time. We had a long conversation about what the night’s events had meant and both decided that we were just as clueless as before and had no idea of what we had just signed up for. We were both clearly impressed by the idea that Ms Fischer, the leader, was right now sitting in some penthouse office in LA or somewhere getting on with her Neurocam business. If Neurocam was some kind of elaborate interactive art project, the scale and art direction of it had just exceeded my wildest expectations. The game had been taken to yet another level and in spite of having just been through a weird and scary encounter, I was still willing to be a player.

When I got home that night in the early hours of the morning I unwrapped the parcel Hastings had given me. It contained a CD with a Neurocam logo on it, a brand new iPhone which was switched on and ready to go, and a very expensive looking black Japanese kabuki mask with a red insignia of a squid placed on the forehead between the eyes. Surrounding the stylised squid design was text, which spelled “Nautonier”. I knew that this was French for ‘navigator’, but I had no idea what it had to do with Neurocam. As for the mobile phone, I could only assume that Neurocam would no longer be using email to contact me.

The next day I called in sick at work, as I was still slightly traumatised from the bizarre developments of the previous evening. With time to reflect on what had happened I began to realise that Neurocam still wasn’t quite fitting the mould of anything remotely similar to what I had uncovered in my research. Sure, it had similarities to “Ivan’s Dogs”, “Project George”, “Strangers and Intimacy”, “Snowdancing”, “Learning to Love You More”, “The Vorticist”, “Surrender Control”, “I Like Frank”, “Flash Mobs” and the bizarre kidnapping business in New York—but it just wasn’t the *same* as any of them. It clearly didn’t label itself as any kind of art project, couldn’t be played as an ARG and had no transparency whatsoever in terms of who was running the show and for what reason.

Assuming that Neurocam was something to do with an art project involving a highly organised team of actors, props and locations, there had to be some kind of precedent out there that would shed some light of why someone would go to so much trouble and for what reason. I decided to breach my confidentiality agreement and seek some outside help. I had to discuss this with an expert in the field, NZ artist Jason Maling aka “The Vorticist”.

Fortunately I was able to see Maling that very afternoon and spent over an hour telling him about my bizarre adventures with Neurocam and my attempts to figure out what it was all about. He listened intently and asked me several questions. We discussed Neurocam for several hours and he seemed to think that it was possibly some kind of art/theatre hybrid project that was seeking to engage an audience outside of the constraints and labels of the art

world. He mentioned another project by the UK performance artists collective Blast Theory called “Kidnap”<sup>70</sup>. During 1998 Blast Theory had launched a lottery in which the winners had the chance to be kidnapped. Ten finalists around England and Wales were chosen at random and put under surveillance. Two winners were then snatched in broad daylight and taken to a secret location where they were held for 48 hours. The whole process was broadcast live onto the Internet. Online visitors were able to control the video camera inside the ‘cell’ and communicate live with the kidnappers.

Maling suggested that if Blast Theory were kidnapping people in the name of art back in 1998, it was not so unusual that I had been abducted the previous evening. He pointed out that I had willingly signed up for my experience as had Blast Theory’s participants. When I mentioned that I hadn’t known exactly what would happen to me, he said that Blast Theory’s participants hadn’t either; their abductions had taken place at times and locations that had taken them completely by surprise. They had however, signed up for a ‘kidnapping’, so they at least knew that was something that might happen to them.

Maling confessed that he was confused about Neurocam’s total lack of media presence as they were obviously a large and well-funded organisation that must have had a history of similar work. He suggested that although the word ‘Neurocam’ turned up nothing on the Internet, perhaps this was simply the label of the latest project from a group who could be operating under another name. I thought of the name “Nautonier” on the insignia of my new mask and made a mental note to google it. Conversation then turned to the possibilities of art projects not labeled as art and how the audience would only have a ‘pure’ experience if they thought that the situation was ‘real’. He seemed genuinely excited by this idea and said that just because it may not have been done before did not mean that Neurocam weren’t the pioneers in the field. As we parted he told me to also check out a work by Italian artists Bosetti and Cuocolo called “Private Eye”<sup>71</sup> as well as attending a performance project that was

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<sup>70</sup> Blast Theory, *Kidnap*, Performance, 1998, London.

<sup>71</sup> Roberta Bosetti and Renato Cuocolo, *Private Eye*, 2005.

happening in Melbourne at present called "Collapse"<sup>72</sup>. He wished me luck in my Neurocam journeys and told me to keep him posted. As I was walking out the door he called out to me that if Neurocam wasn't an art project involving elements of theatre, then there was one other possibility that didn't bear thinking about—it was real.

On the way home Malings' parting words plagued me. What if it *was* real? What if Charles Hastings really was Charles Hastings and Bridget Fischer really was the Chief Executive Officer of Neurocam International sitting in her high-rise office in the US? The thought blew my mind. I remembered the CD that they had given me and how, frustratingly, the CD drive on my computer wasn't working at the moment. Perhaps the contents of the CD were the key.

At home I looked up the kidnap project and found an interesting article in *The Independent* where Blast Theory's Director Matt Adams was quoted as saying:

They (the participants) also love the idea of entering the unknown - that's so rare in our lives. Everyone who's registered will now look at life through slightly different eyes.<sup>73</sup>

This very much reminded me of how Neurocam had created a similar shift in my own perceptions, especially now that I had absolutely no idea what to expect. In another article in the *Sunday Times*, journalist James Armstrong had undergone his own art kidnapping experience with Blast Theory and reported that:

My view of the performance was clouded by the terror, frustration, boredom and fury that dominated my 24 hours in captivity. Then again, maybe that was the point of it all. Certainly, no other performance I have ever seen has brought about such intense extremes of emotion.<sup>74</sup>

This certainly resonated with my experiences the previous evening; I really hadn't ever felt such a range of strong emotions as a response to any form of art or entertainment before. Come to think of it, I probably hadn't experienced such strong feelings in my entire life generally.

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<sup>72</sup> Red Cabbage, *Collapse*, Performance, 2005, Melbourne, Australia.

<sup>73</sup> James Rampton, "Kidnapped! And All in the Name of Art," *The Independent*, 3 June 1998.

<sup>74</sup> Stephen Armstrong, *Sunday Times*, 5 July 1998.

I had a look at the work 'Private Eye' as Maling had mentioned and could see why he had suggested it. At the Melbourne International Arts Festival during 2005 Italian artists Renato Cuocolo and Roberta Bosetti had set up an elaborate performance piece beginning with Cuocolo hiring a private investigator to secretly tail his wife Bosetti. The work then played out over three acts, to consecutive audiences of one. In the first act Cuocolo invites the spectator into the lobby of the Grand Hyatt to view the videos and photographs of Bosetti created by the private investigator. In the second act the spectator is invited into a hotel room occupied only by Bosetti, whose seductive performance is calculatingly designed to elicit a secret from the spectator. Once this confession has been extracted a knock comes at the door and Bosetti ushers the spectator to a hiding place behind a false wall, where concealed peep holes allow the spectator to witness the same scene played out with the next member of the audience. On a promotional website for the project, Cuocolo and Bosetti write that:

It is as if the real and the imaginary were running after each other, as if each were reflected in each other, around a point of indiscernibility. Indiscernibility implies that we no longer know what is real or imaginary, not because they are confused, but because we do not have to know and there is no longer even a place from which to ask.<sup>75</sup>

This was a fantastic example of how the dynamics of theatre, when placed in an art context, could fabricate a construct of reality for individual participants. I imagined what it must have been like being directly engaged by Bosetti to share an intimate moment, only to realise that another person had been secretly watching. There was something I found slightly perverse about this idea, as participants were deliberately manipulated by trained actors/performers into tacitly becoming part of an actual scene, which was witnessed by another audience. But wasn't I being manipulated in the same way? In this case the audience was also an integral part of the creation of the work, but like with Neurocam, the situation was not interactive in the sense that participants could directly control the outcomes of the situation. I felt that this brought to mind an important distinction to be made between interactive works where the audience shaped the work, and interactive works where the work shaped the perceptions of the audience. I liked Cuocolo and Bosetti's comment about not being able to distinguish between what is real or

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<sup>75</sup> Theatre, IRAA, "Private Eye" [http://www.iraatheatre.com.au/private\\_eye.html](http://www.iraatheatre.com.au/private_eye.html) (accessed 6 April 2010).

imaginary because there is no context from which to even make an assessment. I thought that this could be the ultimate aim of such works—to create a reality in which traditional notions of fact or fiction are reversed. I guess this could be seen as an alternate reality of sorts, something I had come across in the game world, but was now seeing in the art world. Certainly it was an idea that overturned traditional notions of art.

The hotel room scene with Bosetti made me think about the previous evening's encounter with Hastings and crew. Had the entire scene been acted out entirely for the benefit of operative "Tript" and myself, or were there other layers involved? It was quite possible that other participants could have been present or that the entire thing was being filmed and broadcast on the Internet or some kind of live-feed TV to another audience. I hoped this was not the case, as this would have made me feel truly exploited. I also wondered at the extent to which we had been manipulated into accepting the reality they had presented us with. What if we had disobeyed instructions and removed our blindfolds or tried to pull off Hastings' mask? What if we had asked him directly what Neurocam was all about? Had they known that we would be so utterly submissive?

The rest of the week passed uneventfully and my Neurocam phone did not ring. It was incredibly surreal to have a brand new iPhone that was fully paid up by parties unknown for reasons that were entirely unclear. I had looked in the phone's directory and it contained no contacts and had not made any calls. I carried it with me at all times along with my usual phone in the hope that something would happen.

That weekend I attended the performance event "Collapse" that Maling had told me about. An artist's collective called Red Cabbage who consisted of several artists, performers, actors and musicians had created "Collapse". As instructed I made my way to a small jetty underneath the Westgate Bridge where 10 or so other punters were milling about. We were met by a large pleasure boat, invited on board and given glasses of champagne by young men and women wearing white plastic overalls. The boat took us out to sea where the skipper killed the engine and let us drift for some time. A strange noise like a foghorn issued from the bowels of the craft



while we were drifting. The engine started and we changed direction and headed for what looked like an abandoned industrial area along from the Williamstown Marina. As we put in I noticed a number of people dressed in filthy rags who looked like concentration camp victims toiling away next to the wharf lugging large sacks full of something out of the ocean and up the beach. Over the next hour we were subtly led by more of these concentration camp-like people, all wearing different colored rags, through a series of massive warehouses and old factories which were all inhabited by people going about their business and seemingly oblivious to us guests. The inhabitants of this post-apocalyptic state seemed to have their own complex culture and hierarchy, which was discernable through their behavior with some of them ordering others about and pushing and shoving them, while others would command respect in a more detached way. The scene was impressively set up in terms of art direction with lighting, props and music all integrating seamlessly with what looked like a long since abandoned factory.

On the way home from the performance I thought about how similar to a play it had been. The only real difference was that the audience moved through the space from scene to scene which all unfolded in real time. At one point I had attempted to stray from the rest of the audience members and explore another part of the 'set' and been briskly grabbed by the arm by one of the 'guides' and shoved back to where I should have been. I thought that Red Cabbage had been very successful in constructing a seamless reality in which the audience were able to experience being 'cultural tourists' in a situation where the rules, rituals and behavior was altogether foreign. I did find myself disappointed by the lack of interaction however—I had wanted something to happen, something that would have impacted more actively on the audience. While it was interesting to play the voyeur for a while, I felt that Red Cabbage could have upped the stakes and made us a more integral part of the reality we were (passively) witnessing. Even something as simple as being enlisted to help lug heavy sacks out of the ocean would have been interesting. As I was now discovering, art no longer had to be a passive proposition; lattes could be spilled and people could get their feet wet. As far as I could tell these kinds of experiences could have two parts to them—art direction/choreography and acting/direct interaction with the audience. Traditional theatre used mostly a passive

combination of art direction, choreography and acting, whereas twentieth century Avant-Garde Theater sought to create a more active relationship with the audience, but still within the confines of the theatre environment. Newly emerging art projects were adding the additional element of actors/performers directly engaging with an audience during events or situations, which were clearly not intended as theatre. Neurocam was going one step further and doing all of this without warning the audience in any way what they were getting themselves into, how long it would last, or how pervasive it would be.

That night I pulled apart my computer and installed the new CD drive I had purchased. I felt a rush of excitement as I inserted the glossy disc Neurocam had given me. It was an auto-run application that filled my entire screen. I watched the slick presentation with utter amazement. Neurocam wanted me to assist them processing applications from people wanting to join the organisation and recruit those who were deemed suitable. They also wanted me to set what they called 'entry-level' assignments for these people. The assignments were the exact same ones that I had completed over the last year. It quickly dawned on me that most of my Neurocam experience so far may well have been dictated by some other operative somewhere who had received this very same promotion a year ago. While I liked the sense of empowerment that went with helping Neurocam perpetuate their project by setting up experiences for other people, I was disappointed that they had cleverly set up the situation so I was still no closer to finding out who they were and what they were doing.

## **Chapter 7: Entering Shadowy World of Neurocam**

During the weeks that followed my mysterious meeting with Charles Hastings I became increasingly busy with my Neurocam work. Hastings had essentially given me a promotion in the form of an extended assignment, which involved processing new Neurocam applicants and setting 'entry-level' assignments. I now had an 'official' Neurocam staff email account and was known to fledgling operatives as "Roger Ascott" from the Melbourne Operations Division. Hastings would call me from time to time to check on my progress and assist me with any problems I was having. He had given me an extensive database from which to meticulously record the progress of each new operative. Operative "Tript" assisted me with all of these tasks.

In spite of being crazily busy with my new assignment I had time to reflect on these latest developments and wonder what they meant in the larger scheme of things. If Neurocam was a type of participatory art project dependant on the actions of its participants, then I could have been facilitating this agenda by actually running the same assignments I had participated in previously.

It was an ingenious setup; to engage an audience by means of intrigue, set them a number of challenging tasks to perform and then put them to work re-creating this experience for others. It had the hallmarks of pyramid structures all over the word like Amway and online get-rich-quick schemes. But it wasn't about money—Neurocam's currency was experiences. And yet they had still managed to retain a level of intrigue for me; I still had no idea who was behind the project, why they were doing it and what other future promotions may involve. I was willing to continue my involvement, which now meant a lot of time and effort, because I still wanted to know more—what was behind the curtain?

Perhaps Hastings himself might just be another operative carrying out another assignment, who had simply been doing this for longer than I had. And what if even Ms Fischer was on assignment? Perhaps Neurocam had been created years ago by people who had long since left and now had a life of its own. These thoughts haunted me immensely—the idea of a meme that

was entirely self-perpetuating and did not need people to direct and control it—the ultimate headless chicken. I realised this was the one flaw in my theory about Neurocam being a new type of art project. An art project would have to be directed by an artist or group of artists at all times. Or would it?

Early one Saturday morning I spilled coffee all over myself for the second time that year. On the front page of *The Age* newspaper was an article *about* Neurocam! Boldly titled, “Entering Shadowy World of Neurocam”, reporter Marc Moncrief had attempted to ‘solve a Melbourne mystery’ by investigating Neurocam. He wrote:

Thousands would have passed neurocam's billboard, displayed in November on Alexandra Parade, one of Melbourne's main commuter thoroughfares. "Get Out of Your Mind", it urged. But the cryptic website it spruiked gave little insight, only the opportunity to register with name and email address. Clearly, however, the organisers had gone to some trouble to get their message out. The billboard would have cost about \$10,000. Whether the whole thing is hoax, mind game, artistic experiment, sinister front or clever marketing ploy remains unclear.<sup>76</sup>

This was quite incredible, after all this time the media had finally heard about Neurocam and were attempting to shed some light on who they were and what they were doing. Amazingly, the article featured a picture of three masked Neurocam personnel in a car with an attractive blonde woman they seemed to be abducting. Hastings was labelled as one of the men in the picture. I couldn't believe that a secret organisation like Neurocam would agree to being so openly photographed like that and felt sure that my Neurocam reality was soon to be exposed.

Moncrief went on to say that:

Police say they have had no complaints, but a Melbourne psychologist says users could be vulnerable to exploitation.<sup>77</sup>

I had to laugh at this—it seemed like a typical media attempt to sensationalise the facts. Or was it? On further reflection it was possible that I had been exploited. To my total surprise Moncrief had actually interviewed someone from Neurocam:

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<sup>76</sup> Mark Moncrief, "Entering Shadowy World of Neurocam," *The Age*, 18 December 2006.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*

When I contacted Neurocam, I had to agree to being taken blindfolded to a secret location before asking any questions. What is known is that those who follow the instructions on the neurocam website are assigned missions, with the threat of grave consequences should these tasks not be carried out. Individuals prove their mettle by completing progressively more complex, riskier assignments - possibly of questionable legality.<sup>78</sup>

This was more sensationalism; I had never heard of any of us being threatened with anything other than dismissal if we hadn't completed assignments. But if Neurocam were threatening people then clearly they were breaking the law, so this was a serious allegation. Moncrief had also called in some big guns:

"That's a little worrisome," said University of Sydney lecturer Andrew Campbell after seeing the website. A specialist in cyber-psychology, or the psychology of human behaviour online, Dr Campbell said the original motivation to register with neurocam was like the benign allure of a puzzle.

"It's the sense of gambling. It's that whole intrigue of, 'Well, you know, how could this hurt me? It's on a computer.' " The reality, he said, could be more disturbing.<sup>79</sup>

He made it sound like Neurocam were some kind of scary cult sect. This was not something I had thought about, but it was not inconceivable. He was certainly right about it being appealing because of the element of mystery. Campbell went on to say:

The only things that are similar to this would be gaming societies. But the gaming societies are very clear cut. You know there is an objective, you know what it is about, you know who the people are and you delve into a fantasy realm for a limited period of time. But in this case, no. This is the first I have ever seen it. This is unique.<sup>80</sup>

It was interesting to see that Campbell had gone down similar paths to myself in his speculations, especially in terms of looking at the similarities with the ARG community. Aside from media sensationalism, I could see how someone could look at the situation from the outside and worry about what people were signing up for. Unfortunately, Moncrief did not delve further into the idea of Neurocam being a kind of art project beyond his mention of it possibly being an "artistic experiment". The rest of the article consisted of a series of interviews with ex-operatives (some of whom I had met on assignment) who spoke about their experiences, and

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

an account of how he (Moncrief) had been blindfolded by Neurocam and taken to an empty warehouse where they hadn't revealed anything conclusive. The operatives didn't say much either, they merely recounted details of the assignments they had completed, most of which were the same ones I had done earlier in my Neurocam career. He ended the article with an admission that he still had no idea about what exactly Neurocam was.

I found it truly astonishing that *The Age* would allow an article like this to run on page one on a Saturday without any clear conclusion. It wasn't April Fools Day and unlike the *Herald Sun*, *The Age* didn't have a history of printing spurious articles on the front page to entertain and titillate the masses. I began to see why Neurocam had allowed the article to run—it didn't actually give away anything that would compromise their operation at all. If anything, it would be a superb means of free advertising to enlist more participants, in spite of coming across as something dark and dangerous. As for the operatives who had been interviewed, they had already been cut off from Neurocam and had nothing to reveal other than their experiences carrying out some of the most basic and above board assignments that were no longer even used. I was highly impressed by the boldness of Hastings and co to brazenly appear in a photograph looking like a bunch of absolute creeps. Assuming it really was them, I'm sure they had a great laugh dressing up for the photo shoot. I envied whatever inducted operatives had assisted in the assignment where they had kidnapped the reporter. I hoped these kinds of activities were something that I would participate in further down the track—as long as they didn't involve breaking the law.

Following *The Age* article there was a predictably dramatic increase in applications to join Neurocam. "Tript" and I worked long into the evenings to keep up with the processing of our new recruits and many trips to the numerous safes were made to deposit envelopes for each new participant. "Tript" became somewhat disgruntled by the amount of time we were spending on Neurocam without the pay-offs of our pre-promotion days. He pointed out that the excitement, danger and intrigue had given way to pure tedium, as we had now become administrators. He threatened to quit and I had to remind him that what we were doing was still

in fact an assignment, and one that would end at some point where we would be undoubtedly given another one.

After several more weeks, Neurocam work become as monotonous as my day job. I needed more excitement or some reason to continue. I decided to speak to Charles about this. I emailed him asking if we could meet in person to talk about my current assignment, and was completely taken by surprise when he called me half an hour later and rather jovially suggested we meet the following evening.

Hastings turned up to the upmarket bar in the city he had suggested wearing an expensive looking charcoal grey suit and looking somewhat nervous and harried. Seeing him unmasked was quite a shock, as I hadn't expected him to look so 'normal'. He was in his early fifties, had close-cropped silver hair and a deeply tanned face like someone who spent a lot of time sailing or on the golf course. He apologised for being a little rushed and asked me what was on my mind. I told him about my waning enthusiasm for the assignment and asked how long I would have to continue. He gave me a little speech about the need for absolute commitment to the project and how a little patience at this point would go a long way. I felt that his reply was somewhat patronising and asked him why I should exercise such blind faith when I didn't even know what it was that I was involved with or even why I was still doing it. This seemed to disarm him and he was silent for a while, seemingly deep in thought. He then pointed out that the central premise of Neurocam was to gain understanding through experience, and that not all of the experiences operatives had would be stimulating and exciting. I told him that I understood this idea, but I needed more to go on in order to continue to dedicate most of my spare time to running entry-level operations. He looked me directly in the eye and said that if I really wanted answers, he would give me a choice—to continue on as I had been, or to know the absolute truth.

I couldn't believe what Hastings had just said to me; that if I really wanted the truth he would reveal everything. I wondered if this had been the case for a really long time and it had somehow not occurred to me to just ask. Now that the moment was upon me where I might finally know what Neurocam's bottom line was, after all the months I had invested in the project

I wasn't sure that I wanted to know. I thought of the countless months of research I had undertaken and my many theories about what Neurocam might have been. Was it really possible that Hastings could simply put me out of my misery right here and now? It was such a dilemma. I felt that if I chose to know the truth then this may well signify the end of the my Neurocam journey, but if I chose to continue, I may not be rewarded with more interesting and potentially life-changing experiences. I spoke of my uncertainty openly with Charles and he simply replied that he couldn't help me; that I had to make this choice on my own, and very soon as he had to leave, I knew what I had to do.



## Chapter 8: Conclusion—Meeting the Man Behind the Curtain

The next week as I walked towards a bar in the city I felt a building nervousness. There was a strong possibility that I was about to meet the creator of Neurocam. When I had told Hastings I wanted to know the truth, he had simply given me a business card and said, “Get in touch with this guy, he will tell you all you need to know”.

The card belonged to someone called Robin Hely, who I had googled as soon as I got home. Hely was a 39-year-old artist who had graduated with a Masters degree in New Zealand in 2000 and then moved to Australia to work on several art projects that seemed to revolve around various aspects of interactive public role-playing, where the audience was usually unaware of the fact that they were interacting with an artist. I was surprised that I hadn’t already come across his work.

In one work entitled “Missing Person”,<sup>81</sup> he had dressed up as a fictitious character who wore a 1920s white suit and acted out the role of a disreputable bar fly at various venues around the city, before putting up ‘missing person’ notices for that character and recording members of the public as they phoned in and reported ‘sightings’ of him. In another work entitled “Delivery”<sup>82</sup> he and another Melbourne artist Peter Burke had dressed up as couriers and attempted to deliver a large two-meter box to residents in Portugal while secretly filming the event from the perspective of a hidden camera inside the box. After that Hely had gone on to realise his most controversial work “Sherrie”<sup>83</sup>, where he had worn a hidden camera and gone on a blind date with a solo mother of two who was looking for love. Matters had been further complicated when, after the date, the woman had shown up at the gallery opening where the footage of the date

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<sup>81</sup> Hely, Robin, "Works 2000–2011" [http://robinhely.com/movies/missing\\_person.mov](http://robinhely.com/movies/missing_person.mov) (accessed 26 July 2011).

<sup>82</sup> Hely, Robin, "Works 2000–2011" [http://robinhely.com/movies/delivery\\_oporto.mov](http://robinhely.com/movies/delivery_oporto.mov) (accessed 26 July 2011).

<sup>83</sup> Hely, Robin, "Works 2000–2011" <http://robinhely.com/movies/sherrie.mov> (accessed 26 July 2011).

was on display, and physically attacked Hely in front of the exhibition crowd. Much speculation had followed as to whether or not Hely had really done such a dastardly deed or had cleverly staged it.

So I was off to meet the professional prankster who may well have had something to do with the creation of Neurocam. I had a list of burning questions written down in a notepad and felt like some kind of intrepid reporter who had finally struck gold. While I was optimistic that I would get some real answers, I hoped this wouldn't be just another level of deceit within the Neurocam game.

Hely, a slim guy of medium height dressed casually in jeans and sneakers, made me feel welcome straight away and brought me a beer. He said that Charles had briefed him on my situation and he was prepared to answer with complete honesty any questions that I wanted to throw his way. I showed him the long list of questions I had written down and he laughed, ordered another beer and told me to fire away. He agreed when I asked him if I could record our conversation, but jokingly asked me not to circulate the contents to everyone on the Neurocam mailing list.

In order to accurately convey the content of the conversation I had with Hely, I decided to transcribe the audio recording I made. Here is what he had to say:

ME:

So you're an artist, can you describe the kind of work you do?

RH:

Hmm, that's a tough one... I guess you could say that my studio practice explores the creation of narrative through public interaction. By setting up interventionist performance scenarios where the public are not immediately aware that they are interacting with artists, actors or performers, the narrative becomes spontaneous and their (the audiences) reactions cannot be predicted. This usually results in a loss of control by the artist over the project outcomes, which allows the audience to share a direct role in the creation of the work. I'm interested in using performance-

based work outside an art context to alter the perceptions of my audience in a more direct way. Rather than being passive recipients of a narrative, discourse or set of ideas, I want them to be immersed in the action like key collaborators on a giant canvas.

ME:

So all this time we've been making art together? This is probably a question you get a lot, but *what exactly is Neurocam?*

RH:

(Laughs) My speech writer would encourage me to use the following press release statement: Project Neurocam is a hybrid art project, which aims to covertly engage an audience in an interventionist performance artwork that is deliberately not labelled as art. Using the devices of mystery and intrigue, participants become part of an evolving narrative experience, which redefines conventional relationships between artist and audience, creating a new type of art practice. Sound reasonable?

ME:

Not really. So I was manipulated into helping you make a work... I feel used...

RH:

I'm sorry you feel that way. We were both responsible for making the work, so one could say it was a collaborative process.

ME:

A collaboration I didn't know was happening... Can you give me some idea of how many people are involved?

RH:

Project Neurocam has now received over 750,000 applications worldwide and currently has a self-sustaining membership base of over 5,000 participants. The project is now in its fourth phase since 2004 and has new assignments being generated by our creative team every month.

ME:

I had no idea it was that huge. How do you fund and run the project?

RH:

Two years ago I received funding from the Australia Council for the Arts to put up the supersite

billboard in Fitzroy. From there I ran things singlehandedly until I had enough operatives to promote to various levels of management. These guys then helped facilitate most of the entry-level assignments. The idea quickly spread on various secret online forums and pretty soon operations expanded throughout the UK and the US. I was amazed at how much work people were willing to put in just to be part of the project. It's something they really believe in I guess, and in some cases it makes people's lives more interesting; it's a break from the monotony of the everyday. And other people just really like belonging to something—some kind of community with a common goal. The common goal in this case is usually to find out what Neurocam is.

ME:

But what if people's everyday life isn't monotonous?

RH:

Then they would probably choose not to engage... Did you find it a break from your everyday life?

ME:

That was a motivating factor for me, but I do happen to have a particularly tedious day job... Have you seen David Fincher's film "Fight Club"?

RH:

Yeah, great film. Why do you ask?

ME:

Tyler Durden's "Project Mahem" involved gathering together a group of participants to work towards disrupting western civilisation. Did this have any influence on the subversive nature of Neurocam?

RH:

Not really. Project Mayhem is similar though in that it encouraged people to step out of their comfort zones and really challenge themselves by undertaking some very unusual tasks, like starting fights with random strangers in public... Not that we would ever encourage anyone to do anything violent like that... But Neurocam doesn't have the same kind of political agenda; it's not really about any kind of attack on mainstream society and we certainly don't want people to go around blowing shit up! (Laughs)

ME:

That's good, I was willing to do a lot for Neurocam, but not break the law... much... When I first got involved I thought that Neurocam was an Alternate Reality Game, is that a common speculation that people make?

RH:

Totally. Many people have likened Neurocam to an ARG and have attempted to play it as if it was one. There's a well known Swedish ARG called "The Truth about Marika"<sup>84</sup> which featured a secret society that gave its members assignments, much the same as Neurocam, although I think it happened later... With most of the big budget ARGs there is a tendency to cross the boundaries of conventional media categories and integrate them into a single interconnected experience, which is kinda similar to what we do with the cam. "The Truth about Marika" really spun people out because it used TV to introduce a faux reality component, which was far more sophisticated than most reality TV around at the time. People really believed in the narrative they were pushing and didn't question the fact that it might have been fabricated. Using TV in this way was actually really powerful and something I would consider if I had the budget for it. But ultimately it was just entertainment for the masses and not particularly conceptual.

ME:

So what do you see as the similarities and differences between Neurocam and Alternate Reality Games?

RH:

The thing that sets Neurocam apart from ARGs is that it's an art project, not just a new form of entertainment or advertising. I like to think that it's more conceptually motivated than that. The other thing is that most ARGs, apart from Marika, clearly state that they are ARGs and the terms of engagement are pretty obvious. Most of them use a central website that clues people into the narrative mystery they need to solve and every step of the way they are aware that they are playing some kind of game. All the offline stuff like getting random phone calls at 3am in the morning wouldn't really be that surprising if you had signed up for that type of thing. With Neurocam we don't tell people what we are and we don't tell them what we expect. We give

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<sup>84</sup> Eric Karstens, "The Truth About Marika: Lie or Gesamtkunstwerk," (2005).  
[http://www.ejc.net/magazine/article/the\\_truth\\_about\\_marika\\_lie\\_or\\_gesamtkunstwerk/](http://www.ejc.net/magazine/article/the_truth_about_marika_lie_or_gesamtkunstwerk/)  
 [accessed 24 September 2010].

people a bunch of assignments, but what they get out of them is entirely up to them. I guess what is similar to an ARG is the way that we also use a fictitious narrative construct to engage our audience, but we don't actually say that it's fiction -

ME:

(Interrupting) You certainly don't, you trick us into thinking that it *might* be real. You certainly had me sucked into believing it was all kinds of things. You wouldn't believe the amount of research I've done trying to figure out what Neurocam's agenda is. I've spent months on this...

RH:

Hopefully you don't feel like you've wasted your time. You could have walked away from it (Neurocam) at any point, but I'm glad you didn't as we get to have this conversation.

ME:

So you actually care what the punters think?

RH:

I'm always genuinely interested to engage with anyone who has participated in this experience.

ME:

I guess even artists need to do some market research... OK, so where was I? Game designer and theorist Jane McGonigal presents the argument that Alternate Reality Gamers maximise their interactions by simulating a belief system where they suspend rational disbelief in order to immerse themselves within a narrative. Is this a technique you have used with your project?

RH:

Well, I guess you could say that Neurocam participants have undergone a process where a fictitious narrative construct has significantly impacted on their daily reality, allowing them to re-invent themselves as Neurocam Operatives. Obviously they are suspending rational disbelief to some extent, as we don't pay them for the work they do, which is a bit odd when you think about it... In terms of them doing this to maximise their interactions, I'm not so sure. The whole point with Neurocam is that because we give people so little information about who we are and what we do, we don't really need to simulate any kind of belief system. People make up their own stories about who we are and what we do, which is the beauty of the project and at the core of its creative possibilities.

ME:

Yeah, well I went from thinking it was an ad campaign, to a reality TV show, to an ARG, to a hoax, to a work of experimental theatre, to a media arts experiment, to a “Flash Mob” to an experimental art project...

RH:

Now you know what it is, are you disappointed?

ME:

I really can't decide. Once I get over this feeling of being duped, I might appreciate it a bit more... So when you talk about the creative possibilities of the project, do you think reality and fabrication become intertwined within the process of making this kind of art?

RH:

That's an interesting question. In a sense you could say that as an art project everything that happens is real, so there is no blurring of boundaries. But in a more practical sense, the ways in which participants join the dots of their experience is a kind of fabrication of reality in that they are essentially creating their own construct. All we do is supply the framework for this.

ME:

Just another question about ARGs:—Alternate Reality Games have become quite sophisticated in terms of creating narrative experiences for players. How important is the narrative component of the Neurocam experience?

RH:

The narrative component of Neurocam isn't really that important. Obviously there needs to be some kind of back-story to hold the whole thing together and create consistency, but really it's more about people making up their own stories. Personally I find ARGs overly prescriptive in the way they focus so heavily on a scripted story, which is why most of them aren't particularly believable. To me a narrative experience is something, which is a little more real—something that happens at street level when we're least expecting it.

ME:

But aren't you the one writing the scripts?

RH:

In a sense yes, as I'm setting the scene, but once people respond to whatever it is that we put out there then all scripts are out the window and we just kind of make it up as we go along...

ME:

So you don't see yourself as the sole author of the experience?

RH:

As I said before, it's a collaborative process, so we're all authors...

ME:

In John Fowles' novel "The Magus", GK Chesterton's novel "The Club of Queer Trades" and more recently Fincher's film "The Game", all revolve around the idea of manipulating a person's reality to give them an unforgettable experience. Does Neurocam operate in a similar way?

RH:

Absolutely! I haven't read the Chesterton novel, but "The Magus" is one of my favourite books and probably the most significant influence on Project Neurocam. I think of the character Conchis as a 'reality artist', which is a term that needs to be introduced into the art world to describe this type of practice. Obviously there are all sorts of moral and ethical issues implicit in messing with people's actual reality to create an artistic exchange, but I think this is all taken care of when you have a participant's consent. I mean, Blast Theory kidnapped people in the name of art and that was totally consensual, so nobody complained in spite of some of the victims having a really really shitty time of it... With Neurocam, we would never physically harm anyone or place them in dangerous or illegal situations, so as long as they are willing to participate there is no problem. The way in which Conchis manipulated Nicholas in "The Magus"<sup>85</sup> was totally questionable ethically and morally, but in the end he (Nicholas) would have done it all over again if given the choice. I think using the mechanisms of film and theatre to manipulate reality is one of the most potent mediums there is and a resource virtually untapped by artists.

ME:

It's a radical idea... Personally I think it's a bit shitty to do whatever you want when you have someone's consent if you don't tell them what's going to happen to them...

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<sup>85</sup> Conchis employs two female actresses to seduce Nicholas and lead him to believe that one of them is in love with him.



RH:

To be honest that's something I've been struggling with over the last few years. As much as I would like to offer full disclosure, it would quite simply ruin the project. Why would people want to participate if they knew everything right from the start?

ME:

Well yeah, but I would have to say that I feel like I was manipulated into participating in Neurocam in the first place. I mean, yes we do consent to being part of it, but you are deliberately deceiving us by *not* revealing what it is that we are part of...

RH:

How am I manipulating you into participating?

ME:

By setting it up so the only way we can find out anything about it is to sign up...

RH:

Yes, but you don't have to sign up do you? Just because you are curious about what it is doesn't necessarily imply that you are being manipulated into anything. You sign up because you want to. If you didn't want to, you wouldn't -

ME:

(Interrupting) I don't think it's as black and white as that. Once I was involved there was definitely a level of deception involved —you do go to great lengths to hide the fact that it's an art project.

RH:

I wouldn't say that we deliberately set out to deceive people into thinking that it's *not* an art project, we simply choose not to label it as *anything*. Is that deception?

ME:

I guess withholding information is a form of deception... But I see your point about people probably not wanting to participate if you *did* tell them exactly what it was right from the start.

RH:

Obviously it's difficult terrain from an ethical perspective, but our intention is not to mess with people's heads by tricking them. We want to give people an art experience, and the only way

we can do this is to set things up in such a way that manipulation and deception may be inevitable bi-products...

ME:

Surely there's a way to do the same thing without tricking people? What about projects like Jason Maling's where he's always totally upfront about everything, but still seems to make it seem mysterious and appealing?

RH:

Actually I'm friends with Jason and we've thrashed this out many a time. I think Jas is a lot more controlling than people think.

ME:

You know Jason? Are you saying he knows about Neurocam?

RH:

Of course he does...

ME:

The fucker, I went to see him and he didn't say anything even when I asked him directly about it...

RH:

Why would he?

ME:

I was genuinely asking for his advice... Why does it not surprise me that a friend of yours would be such a sneaky prick?...

RH:

So I take it that you went to see "The Vorticist"?

ME:

Yes, I went to see a lying bastard...

RH:

I think that work ("The Vorticist") is a really good example of how total transparency doesn't necessarily mean that any less manipulation is taking place. I thought he (Maling) was very much in control of every aspect of that experience, right down to manipulating the conversation. So it really wasn't about just having a nice chat with him, it was about him introducing subtle

cues into the conversation which steered it in certain direction where he had things he wanted to say. I think any kind of interventionist performance art project will always have an element of control in that the situation has to be set up by the artist or artists. As long as participants have the freedom of choice to engage with these situations in a way that allows them their own creative space, I think this is okay. Jason once suggested that I tried running Neurocam from a completely honest perspective where I told everyone exactly what it was and what they could expect. I actually attempted a similar sideline project where I did this and it was a resounding flop. I found that people just couldn't be bothered doing shit if they knew it was just for some guy's art project. For projects like Neurocam to work, people need to be motivated enough to seriously commit to the experience. Without the hook of mystery and intrigue, Neurocam wouldn't be where it is today. But it is interesting that Jason seems to have a lot of success with what he does. He is more of a performer though, and very good at working directly with people. And I like how he doesn't state that his projects are actually art projects, he just describes very didactically what they involve...

ME:

I still have a problem with the element of power and control that goes along with your methods. One could say that you are the ultimate control freak.

RH:

You're not the first person to accuse me of being a control freak... But yeah, I see where you're coming from. I don't know what the answer is, I've thought a lot about the power and control issue and how I could get around that, but ultimately I have developed a practice where that happens to be a part of my working process. I'm sure I'm not the first artist to exercise some kind of control over an audience and maybe it's just something that you have to deal with if you choose to participate in my work. If you think about a really twisted, disturbing horror film, if you have nightmares after seeing it you don't complain to the director... Film and theatre often manipulates and deceives an audience, not to mention the media. It could be said that the media in fact controls us completely, but people still willingly read newspapers and watch TV every day of their lives... Well, actually I don't, but it's all about individual choice...

ME:

Do you enjoy having control over people by being Neurocam's puppet master?

RH:

I derive no satisfaction whatsoever from that aspect of the project. I'm not a 'puppet master', I just happen to be the person who started the project. It's just part of how it works—we have set up a platform for engagement with it's own set of rules, and people who want to play have to abide by those rules. It's not that outrageous, when you go to watch a cricket match you have to abide by the rules of being a spectator. But you do get the odd streaker (laughs)... I wish Neurocam had more streakers...

ME:

Are you saying you want people to break the rules of engagement?

RH:

Now that would be giving away too much (laughs)...

ME:

OK... Changing tack a little here, one of the things I thought of when I was first involved in Neurocam was "Crop Circles". Do you think "Crop Circles" could be considered art and could Neurocam be similarly classified as a hoax?

RH:

I totally think "Crop Circles". are art. I would go as far as to say that they were some of the best artworks around before the creators needed their egos stroked and publically owned up to the stunt. "Crop Circles". initiated all kinds of interesting dialogue with a vast audience and really made people think. The beauty of this kind of project to me is the fundamental question of *what* were they if they weren't made by UFOs, and *why* would someone go to all the trouble without taking any credit for it? It's just a shame that the original creators couldn't be content with the work itself being famous... As far as Neurocam being classified as a hoax, it's actually listed on the "Museum of Hoaxes"<sup>86</sup> website. A hoax implies some kind of deception, but usually for humorous or malicious purposes, so perhaps Neurocam and "Crop Circles". are not hoaxes but works of art. I guess it's all in the intent of a project...

ME:

But surely on some level you're hoping to become famous for your work with Neurocam?

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<sup>86</sup> "Museum of Hoaxes", <http://www.museumofhoaxes.com/hoax/weblog/comments/2271/> (accessed 16 January 2010).

RH:

If I was well known as the guy that created Neurocam, that would be the end of the project...

ME:

But isn't it tempting?

RH:

Well obviously, but I'm more interested in making a successful artwork...

ME:

Have you heard of the performance artworks "Ivan's Dogs" from the UK, and "Strangers and Intimacy", which was staged at West Space gallery?

RH:

Yeah, I've heard of both those works.

ME:

Do you see them as being in any way similar to what you are doing?

RH:

Yes and no. While they are doing some quite similar stuff, these guys mostly engage their audiences within the boundaries of the art world. Their performances are advertised for set times, they are usually housed within designated art spaces and the authorship of their work is clearly defined. Project Neurocam looks more at what happens if work of this nature is situated outside the art world, not advertised as art and not attributed to a particular artist.

ME:

Does that make it art or does it become a private joke?

RH:

Good question... I'd like to think that I'm making art, but I can see how some people might think it's just an elaborate and exclusive kind of prank...

ME:

An expensive prank if you count all the unpaid hours I put in... And what about Phillipe Parreno's work "Snow Dancing" where he stages a party and the people at the party become the artwork? Isn't this a radical departure from paintings on gallery walls? What exactly *is* the art and *where* is it located?

RH:

I find this a really interesting idea and I like that work. Parreno is often used as an example of what Nicholas Bourriaud calls “relational art”<sup>87</sup>. Have you heard of Bourriaud?

ME:

No.

RH:

French art critic and curator Nicholas Bourriaud's theory of relational aesthetics refers to the idea of a new type of art practice where works of art are based primarily on the sphere of human interaction, as opposed to formal, object-based relationships. He has compiled this sort of list of who he considers to be relational artists which includes some of the big names like Vanessa Beecroft, Felix Gonzalez-Torres and Rirkit Tiravanija, who put his flat in an art gallery and got visitors to cook in his kitchen. Although Bourriaud presents an interesting argument for a new type of art practice, he has been largely dismissed by art critics who claim that relational artworks fail to exceed their art world context, and fail to effectively engage with the fabric of the everyday. While Bourriaud is suggesting a contemporary model that responds to new possibilities generated by virtual relationships on the Internet, globalization and a general desire for a more direct interaction between artist and audience, Claire Bishop points out that:

It is important to emphasize, however, that Bourriaud does not regard relational aesthetics to be simply a theory of interactive art. He considers it to be a means of locating contemporary practice within the culture at large: relational art is seen as a direct response to the shift from a goods to a service-based economy.<sup>88</sup>

Locating art within culture at large does not necessarily mean a shift towards art being subsumed by life. Bourriaud seems to be more concerned with changes in the politics of art institutions with his examples being firmly contextualised within art institutional settings. The participatory elements to Bourriaud's examples are mostly concerned with different forms of social interaction that deal with issues regarding public and private space.

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<sup>87</sup> Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*. France: Les presses du réel, 2002).

<sup>88</sup> Bishop, Claire. *Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics*: Fall, 2004, 10.

ME:

Do you think Neurocam is an example of relational art?

RH:

I think the essence of Bourriaud's idea is quite groundbreaking in a lot of ways, but I really can't see anything special about most of the artists he uses as examples. Even Parreno's work was like an in-house art world event, which was documented and put back into art galleries. Neurocam seemingly ticks all the boxes of what constitutes relational art, but is notably different to the other works Bourriaud cites, in that it actually does exceed an art world context and doesn't cater for just an exclusive art audience.

ME:

So is Bourriaud saying that relational art is something new in the history of art?

RH:

I'm not sure. BBC's "Art Safari" presenter Ben Lewis puts forward the proposition that relational art could represent a new "Ism"<sup>89</sup> within the context of art history and in an interview with Bourriaud tries to get a definitive answer, but Bourriaud is frustratingly vague on the matter.

ME:

So if relational art *is* a new ism within art history does that mean that Neurocam *might* be at the forefront of a new movement?

RH:

That's a big call, but yeah I think that Neurocam and some of the other projects we've talked about do represent a new type of art practice, which is aligned with some of the ideas Bourriaud is talking about. I'm interested in making work that does not rely on encounters with traditional art objects in designated art spaces. And yeah, the work does happen in the realm of human interactions and their social context as Bourriaud puts it. Neurocam is intended to be experienced, not viewed, in the larger network of conversations and relationships that make up our lives. I read a great article by a guy called Matt Locke who talks about some of the recent works by Blast Theory, Tim Etchells and Lucy Kimbell. He says that:

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<sup>89</sup> BBC, "Interview Ben Lewis" <http://www.bbc.co.uk/bbcfour/documentaries/features/art-safari1-int.shtml> (accessed 2 July 2009).

Something common to these kinds of works is that they understand how communication technologies have created a series of fissures in everyday life, a series of moments when some small act – a phone call, text message or a letter – creates the possibility of stepping into someone else's world.<sup>90</sup>

And for me, that's what art is all about.

ME:

Interesting. And what about "Flash Mobs"? Do you see any similarities between a mob and a Neurocam Assignment?

RH:

Not really. "Flash Mobs" can be considered works of interventionist performance art, but do not engage participants in anything more than a single act, a one-liner, whereas Neurocam links several events within an over-arching narrative construct.

ME:

'Interventionist performance art', that's a term I haven't heard before...

RH:

That's because I made it up...

ME:

Interventionist performance artists might be the next big thing. I wonder if art schools will be equipped to train them or if galleries will still represent them?

RH:

But some art institutions are heavily invested in art as a commodity, so they might not want to focus too heavily on work that not only doesn't make money, but also doesn't happen within the art world. If everyone in the art scene decided to become an interventionist performance artist, then galleries wouldn't survive and the art world would collapse.

ME:

So how would famous interventionist performance artists get by?

RH:

I don't know. They would probably have to get day jobs...

ME:

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<sup>90</sup> Matt Locke, "Are You Awake? Are You in Love?," (2003). <http://test.org.uk/2003/07/09/are-you-awake-are-you-in-love/> (accessed 28 April 2009).



Do you want your work to be anti-establishment in terms of being some kind of attack on the art world?

RH:

As much as I think art has to change, I'm not interested in doing anything to directly challenge or bring down art institutions. There are still a lot of really good things about the art world; if it didn't exist we wouldn't have so many people making so much great art all over the world.

ME:

Indeed. I noticed that most of the work on your website is very entertaining, almost like film or TV, do you think that art and entertainment are in opposition?

RH:

I've always thought that art needs to use whatever means necessary to engage its audience. If entertainment is the hook, then why not use it as a medium? I read something by a game designer called Raph Koster who says, "Just like games, art that does not entertain is bad art."<sup>91</sup> If you consider that to entertain means to captivate, intrigue or command attention, I tend to agree with him.

ME:

So what is bad art?

RH:

Art that is safe and predictable and doesn't challenge us in any way. Art that is created purely to make money or make the artist famous...

ME:

Why is it so important for you as an artist that your work engages an audience?

RH:

I think that art is all about the relationship between the artist and the audience as a kind of exchange of ideas. To make art purely to explore one's creative self seems selfish and pointless to me.

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<sup>91</sup> Raphael Koster, "A Case for Art" <http://www.raphkoster.com/gaming/caseforart.shtml> (accessed 18 June 2008).

ME:

Have you considered Neurocam's position within contemporary culture and would you consider it to be what Richard Dawkins calls a "meme"?

RH:

I see Neurocam as a kind of cultural mirror. What people bring to the work in terms of any socio-cultural agenda is assimilated into the work as a whole. But Neurocam has become a meme of sorts within the sphere of its own community. The flow of ideas relating to the project has spread rapidly across the Internet and 'infected' many people. Some people say it's like a kind of virus, which is interesting. I'm quite amazed at how all this has happened; what started off as a small-scale experimental art project has now become something like a belief system. And most of the core ideas, or memes, have come from the audience, not from myself as an artist. In this sense the project allows the participants to explore their own creativity, and think and act in the same way as artists might.

ME:

Does Neurocam have any fixed outcomes or would you call it an 'open work of art'?

RH:

We've found that people will only participate for so long before they get burnt out and start devoting increasingly less energy to the project. There are fixed outcomes in that we promote people to higher levels of responsibility where they start running operations for new recruits, but this doesn't happen to everyone. It is largely an open work in that we can never predict the ways in which people will interact and how long they will keep it up. Many people do a couple of assignments and then leave when they find out they aren't on some new reality TV show...

ME:

Why do people participate?

RH:

Mostly because they are intrigued by Neurocam and want to find out what it's all about, but also because they want to belong to something. There was a fantastic art project in the UK started by a guy called Danny Wallace in 2002 called "Join Me"<sup>92</sup>. Wallace put ads in a London newspaper asking people to join him, stating no reason and no purpose, and ended up with

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<sup>92</sup> Danny Wallace, *Join Me*, Interactive public initiative 2002 - present, London, UK.

thousands of people signing up! It was truly amazing, all these people just wanted to be part of a gang, even though the gang didn't actually do anything whatsoever. Another angle is people's need to express themselves anonymously; to be heard without having to deal with any consequences arising from their actions or words. I think having an operative alias is a really empowering thing for a lot of people as is going out in public wearing masks and going on adventures where nobody knows your real name. It reminds me of some really crazy websites that have sprung up in the last couple of years like "Post Secret"<sup>93</sup> and "Confessionizer"<sup>94</sup>. With these sites people can go online and leave their secrets and confessions anonymously for thousands to see. There's some pretty twisted stuff on there and I don't fully understand the reason why it's so popular, but I think it's similar to people's desire to sign up to Neurocam—just because it's anonymous and you can re-invent yourself.

ME:

I don't think I participated because I got to re-invent myself. If I'd wanted to do that I would have joined "Second Life"... I participated because I was curious as hell... And what about when people get promoted, is this something you think draws them into the project even more?

RH:

Yeah, in some cases. Some people find the shifting relationship of power very appealing when they get to start running operations for other operatives. This desire for power and control is just basic human nature I guess, so it's good to be able to have it play out in a harmless way. It's not like we allow people to start setting their own assignments for those under them, which would open a can of worms... Ethically we have to draw the line somewhere...

ME:

Does an audience have to know that they are participating in a work of art to have an art experience?

RH:

Good question. Given that I'm trying to get beyond the traditional labels and constraints of the art world and make a work that is more directly engaging, it's actually almost impossible to clue

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<sup>93</sup> Frank Warren, *Post Secret*, Interactive web based work and mailed post cards, 2005 - present.

<sup>94</sup> topherchris, "Confessionizer" <http://confessionizer.com> (accessed 15 October 2008).

the audience in on the fact that they are experiencing an artwork. Of course this begs the question can anything around us become art, which is hugely complicated and something I don't have time to get into right now... I think that there are enough clues with Neurocam to make people think it has something to do with theatre, performance or at the least some kind of creative role-playing game. I'm not sure what Bourriaud would say about this given that all of his examples of works happening within the sphere of human interaction are firmly located within an art context... It's interesting though, obviously we need a cinema or screen to experience film and a stage to witness the performing arts, but if we are considering a medium that doesn't need these constraints, perhaps it could happen anywhere there is an audience willing to participate. I actually like the multiple ambiguities surrounding Neurocam's public façade: the billboard, the website and the public events. People try and interpret all of these components individually in context, but seldom look at the ways in which they might interconnect in the larger framework of an art project... So I guess ultimately it doesn't really matter exactly what people think they are participating in, as long as the experience or interaction makes them think about a relationship of ideas in the same way as when they experience other art forms. An interesting parallel would be some of the subtler mockumentary films where the audience aren't sure whether they're being presented with real events or fabrication, but still have an interesting cinematic experience. But in this case I guess they are still in a movie theatre, so at least they know they're watching an actual film...

ME:

Well, in my experience I eventually came to the conclusion that Neurocam was probably some kind of art project, but this was only after a lot of my own research.

RH:

Yeah, but I think you will find that the kind of people who are drawn to Neurocam in the first place are the kind of people who will think a lot about the experience and do some serious digging like you did. Did you ever go on any of the American forums?

ME:

No, I always found Neurocam to be totally google-proof...

RH:

(Laughs) That's because of Mr Hastings' strict operational guidelines... But a lot of people have

found ways around that and they think we don't know about. In the US there are heaps of secret forums where hundreds of people log on and talk about their Neurocam experiences. One of my personal favourites is the "Neuroboards"<sup>95</sup> where all kinds of crazy characters speculate endlessly about what Neurocam is and who is behind it. Another brilliant one is "FWIW"<sup>96</sup> which was set up by operative "Hawthorne" aka Jess Kilby. Jess, who works as a reporter in real life, did some serious research on Neurocam and posted her findings on her blog which was read by thousands of operatives all around the world. From this, several communities formed and eventually people started meeting up and forming friendships and even relationships. Most bizarrely, Jess actually fell in love with an Australian operative and moved out here to be with him. She was probably at Prudence with him when you had your chess tournament... I actually find it incredibly strange that an art project brought so many people together as a real life community. My guess is that it happened because everyone had this one thing in common that was quite important to them, and had already placed them in an unusual space where they were kind of free to explore new aspects of themselves. Oh god, I'm starting to make it sound like some cheesy kind of 'urban survivor'...

ME:

For me I did feel a strong bond with the fellow operatives I was put in some of those intense situations with. So as an art project, do you think that a situation that allows participants a direct role in the creation of the work redefines conventional relationships between artist and audience?

RH:

Yeah definitely. It's important to consider that Neurocam only exists because of you guys:—the participants. Your willingness to actively participate without even knowing the terms of engagement is what makes the whole thing work. You are creating the mystery and the intrigue and the hundreds of interesting creative interactions that make this into a successful art project. In terms of your relationship with myself as the artist, this is a totally different model to what is traditionally found within the art world. For one thing, most people don't have any idea who I am

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<sup>95</sup> "The Neuroboards", <http://www.neuroboards.com/> (accessed 17 February 2010).

<sup>96</sup> Jess Kilby, "Fwiw: Going Down the Neurocam Hole" <http://glimmer.typepad.com/fwiw/> (accessed 17 February 2010).

and even that this is definitely an artwork. So it's not about me standing around at a gallery opening sipping chardonnay while people compliment me on my fabulous art... Also, I think a lot of more passive art forms have a different kind of power dynamic where the artist is always very much in control of how the audience experience the work. Film and a lot of video art is a good example of this in that the editing, visuals and sound can be manipulated to elicit a particular reading of the work, often on an emotional level. As I said before, people who know about Neurocam have often accused me of being a total control freak in that I am the puppet master behind the scenes manipulating your reality, but I strongly disagree with that for reasons I mentioned before.

ME:

So do you find it frustrating that due to the nature of Neurocam you can't take the credit for it as a very well known artwork? And how do you think the roles of artists will change if more people start making anonymous works of art?

RH:

Yes, Neurocam has been terrible for my career! (Laughs). On my CV there was a history of new works being created every year and then it looked like I had put my tools down when I started working on secret Neurocam business... I actually haven't been able to get any more arts funding since I started the project as funding bodies like the Australia Council want to see tangible art world outcomes like material artefacts or advertised performances and will not accept my work with Neurocam as valid, in spite of the project having engaged at least a million people. Making work like this is definitely not for people who want their egos stroked regularly or who want to climb the art world ladder, but I think that in time people will realise that if the work itself is successful and well known that is enough of a pay-off for any artist. Even though I'm not considered a successful or well-known Australian artist, I'm just happy that Neurocam could be experienced by a lot of people. I just wish that this (the project) would be recognised by the art world so that it would be easier to get funding for similar projects in the future...

ME:

Doesn't this present a bit of a contradiction? You said that you thought that the guys behind "Crop Circles" should have kept quiet about what they had done, so are you saying that you *would* like recognition from the art world?

RH:

What I mean is that if the project itself, not myself personally, had currency and recognition within the art world I would be potentially be able to apply for funding on the strength of this from arts funding bodies. Obviously there would have to be some kind of confidentiality clauses involved as you couldn't really have a project like Neurocam publically known as having been funded by an arts council... And there's the associated ethics problem as well...

ME:

Funding bodies probably need to be accountable for visible public outcomes. In terms of people recognising Neurocam as an art form, can I get you to clarify what it is that makes Neurocam art and how is it positioned within fine art discourse?

RH:

To me, art is a relationship of ideas shared between artist and audience. Neurocam sets up a framework of ideas, which an audience can engage with from their own perspective, bringing their own experience and knowledge to the interaction. Neurocam is a hybrid art project, which draws on aspects of performance, theatre and interactive games to engage audiences in an art experience that operates outside of traditional art spaces and labels, but is still conceptually located within contemporary fine art discourse as what Nicholas Bourriaud would call relational art.

ME:

I'm still not convinced that you can make a work of art by using the actions of people who participate, especially if you are manipulating them to some extent. And where's the audience? How do people see the work from the outside?

RH:

The participants *are* the audience. Marcel Duchamp said back in 1961 that:

The creative act is not performed by the artist alone; the spectator brings the work in contact with the external world by deciphering and interpreting its inner qualifications and thus adds his contribution to the creative act.<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> Duchamp, Marcel. "The Creative Act." In *Convention of the American Federation of Arts*. Houston, Texas, 1961.

I think what he is saying is that the participants or audience who witness or experience a work, are the link between the artist and the world as they filter their interpretation through their own life experience and create something new. The work itself is merely a vessel to facilitate this process. The creative act, which involves the artist and the audience equally, is consummated through this process. If you think about Neurocam, it's not just about what happens to those who directly participate, it's about what they bring to the situation, how they interpret it, and the way they will then relate this to other people. Of the million people directly involved, I'm sure that most of them have told at least one other person about it, who will have told others and so on... And that's not to mention the many forums and blogs that are out there.

ME:

I guess I'm still someone who, up until recently, has only ever experienced art as paintings, videos or sculptures in galleries. I still don't really understand the point of what you are doing...

RH:

That's a fair call and I would have to say that probably a lot of artists don't really have a solid position to justify why they are doing what they are doing. This is something that may come out of years of experimentation, or might never happen. I really like what one of the Dadaists, Hugo Ball, says about the value of art in society. He says that "For us, art is not an end in itself ... but it is an opportunity for the true perception and criticism of the times we live in."<sup>98</sup>

ME:

OK...

RH:

And there's also the classic art history reference from John Dewey's "Art as Experience"<sup>99</sup>, where Dewey argues that art must be reconnected via aesthetic theory to everyday experience. And this was back in the 1930s!

ME:

So Dewey was saying that art should reflect everyday experience?

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<sup>98</sup> Ball, Hugo, "Dada: Cities" <http://www.nga.gov/exhibitions/2006/dada/cities/index.shtm>, (accessed 19 October 2008)

<sup>99</sup> Dewey, John *Art as Experience*, Perigee Books, 2005



RH:

Kind of. The idea also finds its way in consumer culture, where economists Pine and Gilmore in their book, "The Experience Economy"<sup>100</sup>, argue that business now needs to cater for consumers who no longer want products, but staged and managed 'experiences'. It's a sign of our times...

ME:

So you think Neurocam shows us something about the "times we live in" like Hugo Ball says?

RH:

I think Neurocam is in a position to offer a critique of our society and culture as it's structured as a kind of mirror... The ways in which people engage and the relationships of power and control within these interactions all come from what the participants bring to it.

ME:

I can see that, but I think we'll have to agree to disagree on whether or not it's art. So, moving on, where do you see Neurocam in the future?

RH:

I would like to continue with Neurocam or similar projects, but I would like to do it with higher production values and a larger budget. It is amazing what has been achieved with the help of operatives like yourself and volunteers, but I feel that I can't keep asking other people to do all the work and ultimately need to find a way of funding more extensive operations. One aspect of the project I would like to build on is the idea of commitment. I find that many art projects don't ask much from their audiences or participants, so therefore the overall investment or interest is diminished. With some of the Neurocam community they are prepared to invest a lot of time, energy and thought into the project and this is what generates the best rewards. I've been thinking about ways to make sure everyone is fully committed to the project to the extent where they are able to demonstrate this somehow. An amazing example of extensive commitment to

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<sup>100</sup> Gilmore, J, Pine, J, *The Experience Economy: Work Is Theater & Every Business a Stage*, Harvard Business Press, 1999

an art project is Shelley Jackson's "Skin Project"<sup>101</sup> where she invites people to have one word of a story she has written tattooed upon their body. This work explores the idea of making the participants a living part of the work as a whole, and is quite incredible as it is something they will live with for the rest of their lives.

ME:

Should people get Neurocam tattoos? That would certainly scare people off...

RH:

As much as I would like to do something like that, I think it would be going a bit too far...

ME:

Um, yeah... So how do you intend to keep Neurocam going, to keep it interesting and not let it become repetitive?

RH:

That's hard. To some extent Neurocam now has a life of its own as people have taken over the reins and are now running their own spin-off operations in various countries—which is amazing—but also totally out of my control. If they were to do something really dubious with the project it could have global repercussions, but that's something that I need to sit back and accept... After all, if the participants make Neurocam what it is, then if it all goes pear-shaped that's just part of the project. I just think it would be a shame if people ruined the good work that others had put in, but it's a risk we have to take. It would sure suck if you got heavily involved in Neurocam and several months later they started affiliating themselves with politics or religion or sold out to some shitty reality TV Production Company...

ME:

It would, but is there nothing you can do about it? What if people started doing something really nasty, like setting assignments that have operatives going out and beating people up? Wouldn't you be ultimately responsible?

RH:

That's a good point and if something like that ever came up in a court of law it would be problematic for me to justify my position. I'm not sure what a judge would think if my defense was saying that the participants were free to participate in whatever way they choose, and if

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<sup>101</sup> Shelley Jackson, *Skin*, 2003 - present, New York, New York, USA.

this leads to violent, disruptive or antisocial behavior this is not my responsibility as they are co-collaborators with an equal amount of control over the project's outcomes.

ME:

Yeah, I'm not sure that would go down that well. I'm pretty sure that they would say that because you created the project, you have to be held accountable for anything that happens within its life span.

RH:

I know... We are of making risky art in an overly regulated society. Perhaps this is why so many potentially edgy live art projects still happen safely within the confines of the art world...

ME:

Just one last thing, I know you talked about Neurocam having an audience outside of direct participants through word of mouth and blogs, but do you have any other ways of getting the work out to a larger audience?

RH:

Of course (laughs). I've been pretty open with you about all matters Neurocam so far, but what I am about to tell you now needs to be kept in the strictest of confidence. Can I trust you with this?

ME:

You can. I'm intrigued...

RH:

I want to make a film about Neurocam. A mockumentary actually, set up so the audience thinks it's real. A documentary filmmaker will infiltrate Neurocam and attempt to expose them. He will wear hidden cameras on his assignments so he can get real footage of real Neurocam operatives on real assignments.

ME:

Will he get to the bottom of what Neurocam is?

RH:

Of course not (laughs). I want to make a film that shows what it's like to participate in Neurocam, not to expose what it is and who is behind it. I'd rather keep people guessing. I find this more interesting...

ME:

But surely the project's authorship will become obvious, as it is you who is making the film?

RH:

But I won't be making the film. It's being made by actor and documentary filmmaker William Emmons.

ME:

What?

RH:

In the credits it will look like the lead actor is solely responsible for making the film.

ME:

So even with this you're going to remain anonymous? What about the recognition it would bring?

RH:

Like I said before, I want the project to get recognised, but I'm not doing this for personal fame.

ME:

Or is it that you don't want to be publically criticised for being the guy who manipulates and deceives people?

RH:

That's the last thing I'm worried about, if people choose to see Neurocam in a negative light, as some people surely will, that's just part of the process.

ME:

What process?

RH:

The process of making challenging art...

ME:

When can we expect to see this film?

RH:

I've written the script and I already have lots of file footage taken from assignments. How would you feel about finding yourself in some of the scenes?

ME:

But I didn't sign a release!

RH:

Just joking...

ME:

I hope you're joking dude... Considering everything we've talked about, I wouldn't put it past you to manipulate people into being part of the film as well as the art project...

RH:

Believe it or not I have many ethical lines I would not cross and that is one of them. The film is going into production in a couple of months. We hope to have a premier screening in Melbourne in about six months time. We'll also be attempting to get a general release and put it into various film festivals.

ME:

What huge project... Well, I have to say that after spending the best part of a year heavily involved in Neurocam, part of me is a little pissed off to think that it's probably going to end up as some cult classic film about a bunch of people like me who got sucked into being pawns in your game. Makes me feel a little used...

RH:

I can assure you that the film isn't selling out the project. The project will always be the main focus of my work and film is a way to get it seen by a wider audience. Do you still want to be involved?

ME:

Well to be honest, now that I've met you and know everything there is to know about Neurocam, I don't really see the point in continuing to participate. In a way I wish I hadn't asked Charles to reveal everything and had just kept going with my work.

RH:

But you were no longer enjoying the experience and you wanted answers.

ME:

What would have happened had I not met with Charles?

RH:

You probably would have been given another promotion that gave you more responsibility and

insight into what it's like to create experiences for other people.

ME:

And what would have been the point of that exercise?

RH:

I imagine that eventually you would have come to understand exactly what Neurocam is. As Mr Hastings told you once, "Understanding is gained from experience".

ME:

Hey, who is Charles by the way?

RH:

I thought you would want to know that. A guy called Graham Henstock, who used to be an operative just like you, plays Charles Hastings. He's one of the guys who was mentioned in *The Age* article—as Graham, not Charles. Graham also wanted to find out the truth and ended up having a similar conversation with me where I told him pretty much everything about the project. Like yourself, he initially felt like he had been manipulated, but after a couple of weeks he then expressed an interest in working behind the scenes and has subsequently put in a substantial contribution writing and facilitating assignments as well as generally helping with all the little things that make this project happen. I actually have a team of six people in Melbourne who are helping me with the project, all of whom started off as operatives.

ME:

So instead of going public and spilling the beans they decided to collaborate with you?

RH:

Thankfully all of these people, several of whom live in other countries, have had enough respect for the project to want to help me rather than ruin the experience for others.

ME:

Maybe they just want to have a go at being artists, or arch manipulators?

RH:

Maybe. I think they just really want to participate as insiders, but I don't think they have an interest in manipulating people for fun, nor do they seem to have pretensions to re-invent themselves as artists... And now you're in the same position. If you wanted, you could go public with what you now know and pretty much pull the pin on the whole project. Or you could

keep it a secret. The invitation is also there for you to join us behind the scenes if you so wish.

ME:

It sounds like a very calculated risk you are taking here—how do you know I won't go and spoil the project for everyone by revealing my findings?

RH:

I'd like to think that anyone who has invested a significant amount of time and energy into Neurocam would have enough respect for the project to let it continue. Even if you feel manipulated and deceived, which I hope after our conversation you don't, I hope you can see that our intentions are ultimately good. Anyway, It's been great chatting with you, but I've got to go. I've got a large underground organisation to run!

ME:

Yeah, um OK...

RH:

Bye.

And with that Hely promptly departed leaving me sitting at the table with my half empty glass of beer. I felt mixed emotions. In the space of half an hour I now knew everything there was to know about Neurocam. I finished my beer and headed home to my post-Neurocam life.

## Reflections

After my meeting with Hely I thought a lot about our conversation and eventually handed in my resignation to Hastings/Henstock, who seemed to be expecting this. I was undecided as to whether or not I wanted to join Hely, Henstock and co behind the scenes, but there was no question about my loyalty to them regarding the information I now had at my disposal. It was strange after so many months of being kept in the dark to now be wielding the fate of the project in my hands with the power to destroy everything. Never in a million years could I have predicted this outcome. I felt like Nicholas at the conclusion of “The Magus”, where he values the things he has learned from his fabricated experiences enough to not regret them or want to stop the perpetrators from performing them on others.

But was Neurocam art? Hely had called it an “interventionist performance art project”, and had contextualised it within contemporary fine art practice as relational art. It was a tough call. Relational art, now that I knew what it was, had been around since the sixties with such pioneers as Erwin Wurm and Lygia Clarke, but had always engaged its audience well within the confines of the gallery in spite of it being a critique of the materialistic and commodified basis of the art world. Neurocam, as relational art, was operating as an anonymous entity outside the designated spaces and labels of the art world and also conformed to Bourriaud’s idea of art being an “intersubjective encounter”<sup>102</sup>, in which “meaning is elaborated collectively”<sup>103</sup>. Although I had identified several artworks, sociocultural phenomena, online role-playing games and interactive public projects with similarities to Neurocam, my research indicated that there was no clearly defined historical precedent for, or writing on, precisely this type of art project. How could it be art if people didn’t know about it? Perhaps more people would know about it when the film came out.

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<sup>102</sup> Bourriaud, Nicolas. *Relational Aesthetics*. France: Les presses du râeel, 2002, 17-18.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid



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