

EXCHANGE : : DRIFTING BETWEEN

"It is not on any map; true places never are." Herman Melville, Moby-Dick



I often think of water when I think of drifting. Drifting desperately at sea on a raft, or drifting down a river in an inner tube on a hot, lazy summer afternoon... Then I think of drifters and their drifting. Drifting as an aimless wandering or drifting as a conscious choice to avoid conforming to any particular cultural clique... In any case, drifting implies a movement, a slow, usually unpredictable shift, a transition, a change – an exchange. Drifting defies borders, it doesn't follow maps, it doesn't stop – only pauses, its pace and direction determined by flows rather than by clocks, compasses, or political rules.

Exchange is a performance of trade and relationship that drifts between communities. Out of the back of a 40 ft shipping container the entirety of my personal belongings is freely traded – traded without negotiation – to the people I encounter on a four month road-trip around Canada and the United States. The project engages three critical areas: international politics, surveillance technology, and contemporary experiences of identity. Exchange temporarily erodes national borders, it wedges apart the certainty of the black and white text of trade agreements; it perforates the invisible lines that outline each country. I hear impassioned claims for the need of intense security and surveillance shouted from two fronts: from governments stressing their need to protect national security, and from industry seeking to profit from, and hence maintain, the existing climate of fear that is so conveniently present today. Through Exchange I confront this economic frenzy and technological explosion of security/surveillance devices. Each of my items is conspicuously tagged with a Radio Frequency Identification ([RFID](#)) microchip in an effort to make RFID visible and provoke thoughtful and informed questioning of the limits and liabilities of this technology. The

political and commercial desire to stabilize identity by implementing the use of national IDs or retail “loyalty” cards enables the collection and verification of detailed profiles every person – in these databases our identities are created and stored. Exchange dis-places these rigid identities by dispersing personal belongings (the physical things that the vast data reflects) between people, communities and nations.

EXCHANGE 2006 ARTIST TRADES PERSONAL BELONGINGS TRADE WITH ME	TRADE SOMETHING AND SHARE YOUR STORY ENGAGE IN CROSS-BORDER COMMUNITY CONSIDER THE COSTS OF ECONOMIC PROFIT CHALLENGE THREATS TO PRIVACY RESIST FEAR DRIVEN POLICY
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Drifts emerge. Like banks of snow or dunes of sand they rise up out of the flow. Drifts are never static. Their pauses in eddies of the flow create unfolding passages that curve through space and time. The path that seems solid and static today has been completely erased by the flow, and another path, just as solid and just as static, appears as if it was always there.

(Audio clip here)

While I was growing up my family took many road trips. My parents often elected to drive at night so they could have some peace and quiet while my brother and I slept in the back seat. This was in that almost unthinkable time before people wore seatbelts – I curled up in my nest of quilts on the floor and my brother stretched out on the seat. I remember waking up from time to time, dreams still fogging my mind, and looking out around me at the moon blinking through the forest across the dark sky. I’d sit up and grab on to the elastic straps of my dad’s seat cushion and pretend I was steering – driving the car into the ever unfolding darkness, never sure what lay beyond the reach of the lights.

I guess these early road trips made an impression on me. I’ve been traveling pretty much all my life. You might even say that it is the stationary time that punctuates my travels. Toward the end of August 2003 I was driving on a small highway back from a family reunion, a full

day's drive from home. The late afternoon sun was barely hidden behind the sun visor as I sat stretched up tall, the body prints of bugs were mapped out on the windshield and big transport trucks crawled up the hills with hazard lights blinking the passage of time – my mind drifted under the hum of the engine. “That’s it!” I thought. I’d had a breakthrough. For the last several years I had known that there was a significant project lurking just beneath the surface of a road trip. I was stumped as to exactly what it looked like, how its relevance would become apparent, how its meaning would develop and emerge. The details still were not at all clear to me, but the cornerstone finally drifted into full view – it was a semi-truck.



A few years earlier I was invited to a dinner party. I don't remember the meal, but I remember the guests and the story of one woman's research on fish and their movements in streams. Little microchips were implanted under the skin of the fish and sensors were placed along the streambeds to track the fish as they swam about their lives. With goose bumps on my arms I remember thinking “what if these chips were implanted into people?” This was my first introduction to radio frequency microchips – I have been captivated and astonished by their rapid development and increasing use ever since.

(Audio clip here)

Deciphering and altering the underlying assumptions of a system can enable disruption of that system. Some of the assumptions of identity upon which surveillance systems rely are: that a person's identity is singular, that one's identity is constant and unchanging, that identity has a fundamental connection to the body, and finally, that identity is ascertainable.

I had two chips implanted into my body because of the assumption that each surveilled person has one unique ID number---not two: one chip, one person and one unique code. Surveillance relies on minimizing confusion and keeping one's boundaries clear. (Nisbet, 2004)

Still driving home along the endless highway I thought about trucks – what did they haul? Where were they going? The bottom line was trade, the globalization of production and multinational corporate profit. The approaching ten-year anniversary of the North American Free Trade Agreement flashed in my mind. I considered other international trade/economic agreements such as the FTAA (Free Trade Area of the Americas) and the economic unification of the European Union. The driving force behind them all is undeniably trade and profit. My research into radio frequency technologies (RFID) flashed in my mind as I drove into the setting sun. I was familiar with RFID history and understood that the rapid rise in research and development of these technologies was a result of the economic carrot dangling before eager entrepreneurs. Among the multitude of cultural and political shifts triggered by the events of 9/11, the effects of the ripening market of surveillance and security technologies are blatantly evident. Governments and military officials insist that the newly developed and widely implemented security systems are making us all safer. They insist that surveillance has improved, that untold numbers of terrorist plots have been foiled. They energetically reassure us that invasion of privacy, the tapping of communications, the finger printing and photographing of every foreigner entering a country is for the good of all law-abiding citizens – after all, if you have nothing to hide you have nothing to fear...

RFID, a benign looking technology, is commonly used for toll roads, fuel stations, parking lots, security access cards, and is being used in some passports, credit cards and driving licenses. This is a system of unique identification (versus the more generic ID of barcodes) that can be accessed wirelessly without any need for the tag to be visible. Retail stores such as GAP and Old Navy now routinely use RFID to tag jeans and other higher priced items. The only thing people see is a cloth tag that reads “**REMOVE BEFORE WASHING OR WEARING**”.

(Image here)

Use of RFID in retail markets and identification documents such as passports has many concerned about infringements of personal privacy and they urge legislative protection. In her [paper](#) *Time Enough? Consequences of Human Microchip Implantation*, Elaine Ramesh outlines the numerous threats to privacy and civil liberties posed by RFID. The Electronic Privacy Information Center ([EPIC](#)), an independent public interest research center in Washington, D.C. was established to focus attention on emerging civil liberties issues. It has recommended to the US Federal Trade Commission that strong privacy guidelines be adapted to protect

consumers against potential abuses of this tracking technology. **(Image here)** A few weeks before the Exchange project arrived on Parliament Hill, Canada's Privacy Commissioner Jennifer Stoddart presented her annual [report](#) to Government in which she outlined her concerns about the uses of RFID. Radio frequency technology is here; regardless of its potential benefits, there is an urgent need to consider the privacy implications of RFID's frenzied development and widespread use.

(Audio clip here)

By the time I got back home from the family reunion I had worked out another key point to the development of the Exchange project. I have the semi-truck as the lynch pin to global trade, now I have the technology - the profit it promises and the privacy it threatens... I still need the self and the identity that security so desperately tries to nail down... As I unpacked the camping gear from my car I thought about all my stuff. What was it about everything that I owned - why did it all seem so important? I looked around my home, at the photographs on the wall, at my furniture, my books, my clothes - everything was just stuff. The memories I attached to this stuff didn't belong there; the memory of my great aunt's silverware was not some inherent feature of the forks and spoons. It wasn't any surprise revelation to me that the stuff I owned was seen as a reflection of my identity. That corporations only 'know' me as a collection of data in their back-room computers is understood. What struck me was what the trading away my personal belongings would enable. A facsimile of my identity held by the collection of my things could be traded away and distributed around the world. I would take on pieces of others' identities and blend them together - I would become a conceptual chameleon.

(Audio Clip here)

Over the course of 4 months I traveled with Exchange between many different communities and performed 23 trading events. Each event followed a similar pattern but the traded items and their stories were all uniquely personal. People would gather by the unloaded crates and browse through my things, literally digging through my drawers. When a desired item was found the trader would bring it to me and request to trade - I never said "no". The trade itself involved scanning the RFID tag of the chosen item, tagging and scanning the item offered for trade, and then creating an audio recording of the person's story about the object given to me. The objects being given seemed to fall into three general categories: a very dear item being

‘sacrificed’, something with negative or painful feelings being let go, or something just found in a bag or pocket at the time of trading. Some of the most memorable items wouldn’t seem like much sitting in the drawer of a crate. An old pair of tatty running shoes with Velcro closures, for example. These shoes mark a very significant time for one man – 4 months in a Korean prison after being reported by his ex-girlfriend to have lied about his academic qualifications to teach English.

On a sunny Friday afternoon in early July, I pull the 60 feet of semi-truck and trailer in front of the Johnson Museum at Cornell University. **(Image here)** The event tent gets set up, the shipping container is unloaded, and the trading begins. People have brought old hockey skates, artwork, clothes, books, coins from far away places, and home-baked chocolate brownies to trade with me. Within a few minutes a line begins to form at the trading ‘check-out’. Two women, soon to be off on distant travels of their own claim a night table on the bottom shelf of which sits a manual typewriter. **(Image here)** They intend for this to be an “as is” sculpture – the top of the table never to become the graveyard of home detritus that usually is drawn to cover all available surfaces. I pick up the RFID reader and scan the outgoing item and then I tag and scan the small box that is being traded to me. **(Image here)** I push record and ask René to tell me her story...

(Audio clip here)

Sipping a glass of cabernet I sit on my new sofa in the livingroom of what is my new home. The exhaustion of the long journey only temporarily masks the exhilaration I feel. The rental semi-truck is returned and I am preparing to extend the project to go global. Some changes have been made to the project software; it now enables participants to ‘browse’ through the objects by listening to the stories directly and can also accommodate the ‘self-serve’ trading that will be required as it travels abroad. Although the road-trip is complete Exchange is just in its infancy; it has a whole world to travel and trade through before it settles down. In the liminal state just before sleep I drift through possible futures of the developing project – the voices of so many telling me their stories...

(Audio clip here)

(Video clip here)

References:

Nisbet, N. "Resisting Surveillance: Identity and Implantable Microchips", Leonardo Journal of the International Society for the Arts, Sciences and Technology 37.3 (2004): 211-215.

Stoddart, J. "Report on the Personal Information Protection and Electronic Documents Act", Annual Report to Parliament 2005
<http://www.privcom.gc.ca/information/ar/200506/2005_pipeda_e.asp#018>

Ramesh, E.M. "Time Enough? Consequences of Human Microchip Implantation,"
<<http://www.fplc.edu/risk/vol8/fall/ramesh.htm>>.

The audio clips are partial readings from the Exchange blog; see the transcripts below.

*a long delay in writing – things got hectic
I went to Tijuana, got stopped briefly at the Mexican border, I was asked to open the trunk
I received a ceramic football piggy bank, much loved dancing shoes, and a glittery antler
crown from a dance production in Paris*

*trades included home made apricot jam, home made honey, locally roasted coffee, drawings, a
New Mexico Burning Man ball cap, a lifetime of favorite recipes and a clay skull as a
reminder of the cycle of life
there was a book that inspired a boy to read, and a bag from India marking a street riot
and the brandishing a large sword
two dads traded a wooden beach pelican (named pelican) – set free to have adventures
a neighbor devised a remote controlled car that was intended to be dressed up as an opossum
to talk to an old friend who liked to sit out on his porch
I was only reprimanded for taking pictures, not for leaving the camera*

*the 1973 world year book was a pleasant underestimation of my birth year, Lucy's (5.5 yrs
old) ceramic turtle made at summer camp drifted into the voyage, a ring from Vietnam and a
necklace signifying a day in Hong Kong ... Feb 9th
a USB memory stick with 2 files remaining, a miniDV tape with documents of a Cornell bridge
prior to its demolition*

*last night I slept in the truck as usual, and had the 2 fans going and the cooler plugged
in... it was the first time I drained the battery. I woke at 6:30 this morning – melting in
the heat of the now still air. when the fog of sleep lifted my heart jumped and I wondered
if the truck would still start*

*In these days of the revitalization of the space program, nuclear missile tests
(threats?), suspected terrorist arrests, increased security, border patrols, profit at all
costs, where are the people? Where are we? When do we take a stand and demand that our
global, community and individual humanity be acknowledged and respected? It isn't for sale,
for profit, or for trade. Rather than fortify our homes and neighborhoods and countries,
perhaps it is time to reach out, to risk, to share our vulnerability that is our humanity
bearing 342 degrees (into the fog...). driving the 400 and something foot ship takes a
little practice as I so clearly demonstrated in my zig-zaggy path through the Bay of Fundy.
I was soon replaced by auto-pilot
a city of crazy roads*

Aside from the day to day travel stories, we are all being stretched on this journey - it is as emotional as it is physical. Jumping into the insecurities of nomadic life is most definitely a challenge. At this point I feel pretty lucky to have any idea of what the next couple of days have in store for us (no more longterm planning or delusions of control)
I woke, rather suddenly, to the ring of my cell phone and heard Linda ask if she woke me..."umm, not really"..."Yes I did, I knew it, that's why I called extra early. I'm going to put you on hold now...don't fall back asleep"... "I won't"..."
"environments and systems can interact and respond to their occupants". It is interesting to think about this project in terms of responsive architecture. Whose response? Which architecture? Which occupants? My newly nomadic life presents continuously changing architectures - those of the truck, service shops and truck stops, highways and rest stops, restaurants and internet cafes to name a few. Communities of people in varying tensions of connection, shifting patterns of thought, and dissolving expectations are poignant reminders of the ephemeral structures I wander through

my embarrassing junior high school photos and my photo album from 1988 trip to Africa
Battery power is running low and we still have lists to prepare
the weird thing is how quickly VISA identified that something was up with the 1st card. I used it to buy gas this afternoon (presumably where I parted company with it). It was then used to buy gas at a different station and then taken to Walmart for shopping where the system denied the card. At this point I was called by Visa - all of this took less than 2 hours and only 1 transaction to raise the flag. On the one hand it is very hard to be concerned with this as it has saved me more grief and false charges, but on the other, look how well my spending patterns have been tracked. One extra fueling and the card was flagged and by the next transaction, the card was blocked and I was phoned. Alas, mixed blessings like so much in life

By 1:30 we were pushing the crates along the roads and sidewalks. Navigating around pedestrians (for the most part) and aiming to avoid ruts and ridges (impossible) we finally made it UP to the impressive icon of Canadian power (such as it is). Apologies to those, like René, who showed up at 1:30 and didn't find us - thanks for coming out - It took far longer to push those crates up the hill than I expected! Somewhere between the other protestors and the front doors we parked our crates and melted on the pavement like chocolate
the saga continues - brakes hold me up in the barrio

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