"Without You
I'm Nothing" or:
The Relevance
of the Invisible

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The first view of Planet Earth from outer space was an important historic event. The technology behind space travel enabled humanity to occupy a new collective vantage point, one that visually anchored what had previously been invisible. The very first, and most famous, color photograph of Earth "from the outside" that Apollo 8 astronauts Borman, Anders, and Lovell took from space on December 24, 1968 entered history with the title *Earthrise*.[1] It became a pictorial icon for an era of new technological possibilities, a point of departure, and simultaneously a symbol for the burgeoning environmental movement because it revealed the finite living space of humanity.

In 1966, after Lunar Orbiter 1's first successful mission to the moon, Stewart Brand — author, activist, and inventor of the term "personal computer" — had already mounted a major campaign challenging NASA to publish a photo of Planet Earth from space. He was convinced that such an image would change our worldview, and not only in the literal sense. In the fall of 1968, he launched the first edition of the *Whole Earth Catalog*, an image of the "whole earth" on the cover. The catalog listed assorted useful and independent tidbits of information about products that support a sustainable lifestyle. Brand's notion of the term "tools" was intended to lead to an understanding of complex "whole systems." He conveyed ideas of global unity, environmental protection, affinity for technology, and cultural networks. Thus, the *Whole Earth Catalog* was eventually cited as a precursor to search engines such as Google[2] and is now considered one of the most important documents of California's counterculture.

The consequences of this event are remotely, yet still concretely, related to the concept underlying the work of Peter Jellitsch, which can be interpreted as a reflection on the socio-cultural transformation process set into motion by the Internet. The *Data Drawings* are premised on a fundamental, and now indispensable, component of life and work today: the Internet, or World Wide Web, whose origins can be found in the continuation of the media discourse that began in the 1960s.[3] If nothing else,

1   According to NASA audio recordings, the image was de facto an unplanned snapshot taken by astronaut William Anders; a short time prior, his colleague, Commander Frank Borman, had taken a similar black and white photo from a different angle. Nowadays this color photograph counts as the most influential environmental photograph ever taken. A black and white photograph taken in August 1966 by the Lunar Orbiter 1 satellite was not publicized by NASA at the time it was taken.

2   The comparison stems from Steve Jobs, who in his 2005 commencement address at Stanford University called the *Whole Earth Catalog* "one of the bibles of [his] generation." "Stay hungry. Stay foolish." (the slogan he frequently quoted later), was from the back cover of the 1974 edition of the *Whole Earth Catalog*. In the 1980s, Stewart Brand's idea of the *Whole Earth Catalog* gave rise to the project The WELL ("Whole Earth 'Lectronic Link"), one of the first virtual social communities lasting to the present.

3   Cf. Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (1964); Marshall McLuhan & Quentin Fiore, *The Medium is the Massage* (1968).

the stylized icon of the globe is a symbol for "the Internet" and our networked world, the only material prerequisite being the constant availability of an online connection. Against a background of technological and digital achievements since the first view of Planet Earth, the *Data Drawings* illustrate our present time in a formal-aesthetic way as the pervasive chronicling and analysis of people, goods, and data across the global network. Through the physical act of drawing, Peter Jellitsch makes the invisibility of data discernable in a visual symbolization of what the global network produces: a perpetual and potentially never-ending creation of value from nothing.

The quintessential success of the Internet, which has significantly changed our society, rests upon the possibility of exchanging data at high speeds, whereby the increasing rapidity (bandwidth) of this exchange has been the most significant driver of its development and possibilities. Such network connections' data is the foundation and starting point for Peter Jellitsch's artistic work. In his *Data Drawings* — large-scale, topographical drawings — he gives physical form to the invisible digital processes that surround us. Using application software, the artist recorded measurable data off of WLAN connections—ping, download and upload rate. After noting the actual numerical values, Peter Jellitsch creates an initial pictorial representation by diagramming the deviations in the Internet connection along the axes of time and intensity. He then repetitively translates the diagrams into formally complex drawings (pencil, colored pencil, paint, and acrylic) evocative of landscape topographies. With this process, precise numerical values are translated into an abstract artistic gesture, whereby the invisible manifests itself in a tangible object — the drawing — with the unmistakable variability of human imprecision.

A quasi homage and wink in reference to On Kawara's famous *Date Paintings* is given not only by the choice of title of Peter Jellitsch's *Data Drawings*: every *Data Drawing* is simultaneously a snapshot and a mapping of the Internet connection of the artist's whereabouts at the time of the

measurement. The day of the measurement is the day of the drawing, therewith combining concept and repetition. The act of (re)counting invisible data at the artist's immediate location becomes process-contingent self-monitoring and makes a statement about the status quo of the networked world. In the surveillance society of the 21st century, the Internet's trove of data is tapped at central hubs; state power is defined by access to, and ownership of, information as a critical resource. In the sense of a "transparency society," the position of the monitor has shifted and become decentralized. In *The Agony of Power*, Baudrillard describes the end of the perspectival "panopticon": "The eye of the TV is no longer the source of an absolute gaze, and the ideal of control is no longer that of transparency. This still presupposes an objective space (that of the Renaissance) and the omnipotence of the despotic gaze."[4] The "digital panopticon" of the 21st century lacks perspective inasmuch as surveillance is no longer conducted from an omnipotent central point, but from within itself. The omnipresence of voluntary scrutiny is the essence of its efficiency.[5]

One could think of On Kawara as the first "self-tracker" who kept and published precise records of when he got up, where he went, whom he met, and what he read.[6] The surveying and cartography of data in the digital era is a tool for intellectually grappling with the processes underpinning social and political developments. The augmentation of the numeral can be seen as a sign of the ever-increasing measurability and quantification of the human being,[7] who willingly or unwittingly contributes to the sprawling data linkages around the world. Inspired by Edward Snowden's revelations, which raised people's awareness about the overall reach of the global surveillance network, American infographic designer Nicholas Felton, over the course of several years, developed and published his "Personal Annual Reports" wherein he visualized, using graphs, maps, and statistics, an assortment of the personal data and metadata from his communications (such as how frequently he used certain communications platforms, how frequently he emailed, etc.).[8]

4   Cf. Jean Baudrillard, *Agonie des Realen*, (Merve Verlag Berlin, 1978), 48. English translation from Byung-Chul Han, *The Transparency Society*, translation by Eric Butler, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015), 45.

5   Byung-Chul Han, *Transparenzgesellschaft*, (Berlin: Mattes & Seitz, 2013), 49.

6   In his series of works *I Got Up, I Went, I Met, I Read*, On Kawara kept a record of his daily personal activities for twelve years (1968 to 1979).

7   Cf. www.quantifiedself.com.

8   Cf. http://feltron.com.

By chronicling the Internet connection in his *Data Drawings*, Peter Jellitsch also inscribes coded information about his whereabouts into his drawings. In contrast to Kawara or Felton, however, this isn't about the immanence of the information per se, but about the visualization of their intangibility. The Internet is the vector of a new geography; it has conjured up virtual spaces that overlap with real ones and transformed our society and the way we navigate through the world.

Through the process of their genesis, the *Data Drawings* become an interface between knowledge and experience, that enables the artist to uncover the processes of a networked world from an objectivized standpoint. Jellitsch constructs a topography of invisible data, as described in the "map-territory relation": in its translation, measured information is abstracted and utilized for orientation. With digital data, the aura of the original[9] is not lost in repetition — it remains identical over the course of its reproduction and dissemination. In the process of its visualization the data becomes material funneled into a process of aesthetic refinement.

With his symbolic structure of readings from a source of omnipresent WLAN connections, the artist transforms his data recordings into an imaginative topographical overview without a function — the information behind the diagrammatic spikes is no longer decipherable; — big data analyses come to naught in the encrypted poetry of the artistic gesture of drawing.

The artist applies the paradigmatic and inductive thought process of abstraction to the data he has selected for processing. For example, in several of the *Data Drawings*, palm trees stand as significates for the data source: they show the types of palm trees used in the US as models for concealed wireless antennas, also known as "monopalms" based on a word play of monopoly and palm.[10] In Los Angeles, Jellitsch became acquainted with the peculiar camouflaging of cell phone and wireless towers on public land while taking part in the MAK-Schindler Artists and Architects-in-Residence Program. During his six-month stay, he developed the first comprehensive series of *Data Drawings*.

9   Walter Benjamin, *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit* (1936).

10   This was accompanied in 2016 by Peter Jellitsch's artist book *Palm Tree Antenna*.

11   Cf. Boris Groys, "Entering the Flow," in: C. Cox, J. Jaskey, S. Malik (eds.), *Realism, Materialism, Art*, Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College, (New York: Sternberg Press, 2015): 79–80.

12   Cf. Boris Groys, "Kosmische Angst," in: 9. *Berlin Biennale für zeitgenössische Kunst*, 2016:112.

13   Cf. Boris Groys, "Kosmische Angst," in: 9. *Berlin Biennale für zeitgenössische Kunst*, 2016:113.

14   Cf. Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981): http://www.bconrad-williams.com/files/7313/9690/1991/Baudrillard-Jean-Simulacra-And-Simulation2.pdf, https://web.stanford.edu/class/history34q/readings/Baudrillard/Baudrillard_Simulacra.html.

15   The title chosen by Peter Jellitsch for his solo exhibition on the occasion of the STRABAG Art Award—*Without You I'm Nothing*—was the title of a 2011 exhibition in Chicago, where the physical presence of the viewers was incorporated into the artistic works as a condition for their reception. Peter Jellitsch has reinterpreted this statement for his work to signify the immaterial presence of the data, without which his works would not exist.

Every space — physical or virtual — is virtually manifested as a "data packet." The common notion of the "data flows" that stream through the immaterial territories of the networked world must be examined, for digital data production is neither fluid nor immaterial: Across the Internet, every piece of information has its place, its "address," and hence, can be tracked and retrieved at any time.[11] The grid as the central design system of modernity aims at unification and reproducibility, a principle that also can be transferred to the standardization of social systems and sociopolitical developments in general. In a continuously controlled and monitored world, all data and its movements are verifiable and registered in the network — even the Internet is materially and metaphysically inscribed in the earth and will succumb to its fate, like all media up to now, except perhaps in even more radical fashion.[12] Human beings and their data are dependent on everything that happens (politically, economically, and ecologically) on Planet Earth, and even *it* is not isolated in its position within a cosmic whole.[13] "The invisible" in the form of the *Data Drawing* becomes an emblem of Baudrillard's hyperreality: a simulacrum without an example, a model of the real without origin and without reality.[14]

Thus we come full circle to the reference mentioned at the outset. With the image of the whole earth something came into view for the first time that for most of us will always remain invisible — the view of the planet we live on, from the perspective of an indeterminable "out there," which made it very clear that without our planet, there would be no "us," no people, no data, no network, no art: *Without You I'm Nothing*.[15]

Marlies Wirth (*1980) is a curator of MAK—Austrian Museum of Applied Arts/Contemporary Art, Vienna since 2006. She is curating exhibitions, performances, and discursive events in the fields of art, design and architecture, including the *HOLLEIN* retrospective (2014) and the themed group show *24/7: the human condition* for the VIENNA BIENNALE 2015 or the series APPLIED ARTS. NOW with solo exhibitions of a younger generation of artists, designers and architects. With a focus on conceptual, site-specific, research-, and time-based art and a particular interest in the cultural-anthropological contexts of artistic production, she also develops independent exhibition projects with international artists and contributes texts and essays for various publications.