

A Fugitive Data Bank

Paul Guzzardo



SECRET Baker is a cycle of multimedia productions. I am the original assembler, and now one of many “collaborators.” The cycle explores activist digital art praxis in our media saturated playing grounds. It uses a fugitive data bank that moves between traditional and alternative exhibition---performance venues, and into the street. In a series of media art constructions and installations, I’ve probed connections between the street and digital information networks. For the last ten years I’ve looked into how new communications technologies can remake the public sphere. My projects interject information networks---and the archives that move through networks---into a highly mediated public sphere. **SECRET Baker** is about enriching the public sphere, even while prompting critical reflection on the forms it is assuming.

THE CYCLE

The Data Bank

The cycle juggles a surveillance data bank. Specifically, it grabs hold of the FBI files of entertainer Josephine Baker, FBI Bureau Chief J. Edgar Hoover, and radio personality Walter Winchell to tell stories. The cycle debuted publicly as a fine art installation projected onto the exterior walls of Tadao Ando's Pulitzer Foundation for the Arts in St. Louis. It soon developed into a multimedia play before morphing into a film; the databank now plays the documentary film circuit. Recently it surfaced to haunt post-game revelers partying across the street from Busch Stadium after a Cardinal's baseball playoff game. It spent the holidays in a sushi bar/night club, and now is en route to Scotland, via Macomb.

The Materials

This multimedia mosaic makes theater and public art out of 'net accessible' government documents from a 1950's surveillance data bank. Faded and scratched, and brutishly blotted out, typescript entries portray the numbing bureaucratic activity of government surveillance. Viewing these microfiche memos, telegrams, newspaper clippings, and photos we are haunted by the FBI's pursuit of the African-American, expatriate performer Josephine Baker. Buried in the 400-page Baker file is a dossier prefaced again and again with the words “that she was born in St. Louis Missouri in 1906, daughter of a St. Louis washer woman”.

The Praxis

The Cycle hones in on what this writer tags as “Recursive Urbanism” and “DataBank---Agit Prop”. This is a new media urban design practice. It is for a digerati set who still like playing in the street. Recursive Urbanism proposes the “street as the platform” for a new media practice. It exploits the recursive “loop-cut-paste” digital grammar of today’s digital information systems. Databank - agit prop exploits exploding data systems. Together they take to the street and hope to maneuver through the scrambled relationships between digital information networks and street corners. The goal is to activate the public sphere. It’s “agit-prop” for an information era. It belongs and works on this new platform.

Iterations

December 31 2004 / January 1 2005 –“Marshall McLuhan Meets Josephine Baker”

Projection Pulitzer Foundation for the Arts -- First Night Celebration

Sponsor -- St. Louis Grand Center

February - March 2005- “SECRET: The Josephine Baker FBI” Theatrical Production

Sponsor --Saint Louis Community College at Forest Park

October 2005: SECRET Remix Mix - “Trucks and Tents”

Site across from Busch Stadium – Downtown St. Louis

Occasion - Cardinal play-off baseball game

November 2005 – Documentary: SECRET - The Film

Sponsor - St. Louis International Film Festival

December 2005 – “SECRET Baker Dance Mix” -

Sekisui Pacific Rim night club/ sushi bar

January – March 2006 - Paul Guzzardo: "Iterations of Interface"

WIU Gallery Installation - Sponsor Western Illinois University

February - 2006 - ‘The City in the Digital Age’ - Laser\net

Sponsor - The Geddes Institute of the University of Dundee and Centrespace Gallery

(Currently there are ongoing discussions for a SECRET related installation at Southern Illinois University---Edwardsville, Illinois and at the Figge Art Museum, Davenport Iowa.)

CYCLE PRAXIS - DEVELOPMENT

Three of Guzzardo’s previous St. Louis new media projects offer a background to the cycle: a media night club, a street-front media lab, and an interactive public art assemblage. Two were built, one was not. **Club Cabool** and the **MediaARTS Lab** addressed the performative dynamics of new communications technologies in the public sphere. In the club and in the lab, the process of digital production was showcased on a public platform. The **Walk Way** proposed that this model and the audience be expanded to multiple light rail stations. Additional information can be found at these sites:

cabool media -night club - www.secretbaker.com/cabool.html

street media lab – MediaARTS Lab - www.secretbaker.com/mediarts-lab.html

light rail proposal – Walk Way - www.secretbaker.com/light-rail.html



AN ACTIVIST NEW MEDIA MANUAL

In today's digital culture, with its plethora of de-contextualized everything, there are big hurdles out there in trying to explain and sell an activist and interventionist new media practice. New media projects are more than complex, they are political. Such projects collide with traditional institutions and cultures as they encounter the organizational credo "if you have to explain you lose." Neither the institutional will nor the patronage models are yet in place. Many of the traditional art and film cultures, as well as the philanthropic pillars remain at best indifferent to new media's "nomadism" and "hybridity". A digital divide analysis - with its dogged attachment to treating information as chattel - is not open to the sometimes opacity of a new media praxis. (Certainly recursive urbanism and data bank agit prop are not numbers one and two on institutional agendas.) Despite these obstacles, however, SECRET Baker seems to work. The following may account for its viability, and offer a map for a sustained activist urban design practice.

MYTH - The cycle is tethered to something bigger than itself. One may think of this something as myth. Three figures propel the cycle: Hoover, Winchell and Baker. Through the interplay of these characters, the morality play enters the information age. Josephine Baker's FBI file records the entertainer being followed and harassed all over the world by a host of federal agencies. She is "the traitress," "the undesirable," because she gravely wounds FBI chieftain J. Edgar Hoover's closest friend Walter Winchell. Winchell is old media's mega-superstar. Hoover represents a force that encircles and paralyzes. Gossip master Winchell is the voice that destroys by slashing out on the airways and in print.

All three still loom very large. They are more than just historical figures, as they remain the subjects of political, journalistic, Afro-American, and feminist studies. They are truly the stuff of myth. The recent and unsettling novel by Philip Roth, *The Plot Against America*ⁱ revolves around the clash of an allegorical Winchell and Charles Lindbergh. Hoover as a figure of parody, and as boogiemaster proliferates in theater, films and literature.

Because of her scrape with these two men SECRET appropriates Josephine Baker to refocus and redeploy the Trickster Myth. The USA surveillance story is secondary to that of the international diva as trickster archetype. It's Baker as trickster who's the actor on this recursive streetscape stage. The trickster is psychologically and maybe psychically best able to act on the stage---on a stage

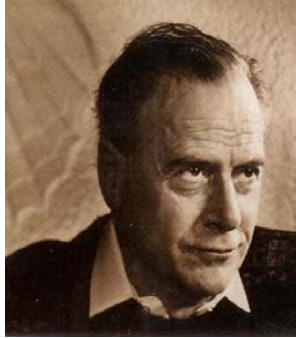
that dissolves boundaries, to leap from from theatrical stage to political stage. And anyway, absent “a Baker” why design and build this stage? Without the trickster it will be empty. Nobody will be out there to strut on it.



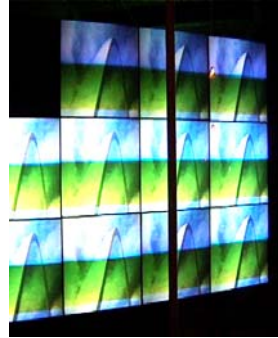
BOOSTERISM - Despite all new media being fugitive, this multi-venued series of productions does have a St. Louis, Missouri base. Josephine Baker is from St. Louis. The project was developed in St. Louis. The author’s earlier projects were in St. Louis. The cycle attached itself to the centennial of the birth of Josephine Baker, a well known public figure, and *Marshall McLuhan Meets Josephine Baker* coupled Baker with an intellectual who was forgotten locally. McLuhan did his early work in St. Louis, and this merger afforded access to institutions that otherwise might be new media hesitant (and to a celebrity architect’s slab concrete walls).

St. Louis has a rich new media history, albeit largely ignored. Marshall McLuhan served as professor of rhetoric and interpretation at Saint Louis University from 1937 through 1944.ⁱⁱ His first book *The Mechanical Bride* was conceived and partially drafted in St. Louis. McLuhan’s student and later colleague Father Walter Ong also lived and wrote in St. Louis. It was here that McLuhan suggested to Ong that he look to Peter Ramus to understand the transition from orality to print. This led to a string of Ong’s seminal new media texts and Ong’s monumental *Ramus, Method, and the Decay of Dialogue*.ⁱⁱⁱ It was Walter Ong in his 1962 review of Marshall McLuhan’s *Gutenberg Galaxy* who raised the need for a new media hermeneutics when he wrote “If the human community is to retain meaningful possession of the knowledge it is accumulating, breakthroughs to syntheses of new order are absolutely essential.”^{iv} Forty years later it is still difficult to raise the need for new media hermeneutics in St. Louis (or anywhere for that matter). As three-dimensional culture descends into two-dimensional digital apparel there is a desperate need to craft innovations in syntheses. In an age of nano second change maybe some “brash boosterism” helps to move it

along. If you want to push an interventionist practice, you use whatever tools you have.



McLuhan



Arches



Ong

REDUNDANCY - Redundancy is essential to this fugitive data bank. The SECRET cycle moves from traditional venues and various urban places: sports bars, ribbon cutting events, Tadao Ando's Pulitzer Foundation, night clubs, college theatres, and then on again. The cycle's redundancy is internal as well external. In fashioning performances and installations SECRET appropriates the maddeningly repetitious and duplicative FBI surveillance files. It's the repetitious banality of surveillance files – as content – which makes it so correct for this time and place. Redundancy rather than truth is our beauty.



The SECRET Baker cycle explores connections between information networks and the street, and delves into programming and design strategies. As it grapples with the digitization of culture and “an immobilized spectacle addled public”, it tries to imagine public spaces as agoras where reflective citizens gather.

ⁱⁱ Philip Roth, *The Plot Against America* (New York, Vintage International 2004).

ⁱⁱⁱ Philip Marchand, *Marshall McLuhan: The Medium and the Messenger* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press 1998), 48-87.

ⁱⁱⁱ Thomas J. Farrell and Paul A. Soukup, *An Ong Reader - Challenges for Further Inquiry* (Cresskill, New Jersey Hampton Press, Inc.2002) Introduction, 10-11.

^{iv} Ong, W.J Review of the Gutenberg Galaxy, *An Ong Reader –Challenges for Further Inquiry*.

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