



**HAL**  
open science

# Body of evidence, gestures of dysfunction. Technology as practice in the work of Natascha Sadr Haghghian

Giovanna Zapperi

► **To cite this version:**

Giovanna Zapperi. Body of evidence, gestures of dysfunction. Technology as practice in the work of Natascha Sadr Haghghian. *Texte zur Kunst*, 2017, *Idiom - languages of art*, 108, pp.86-101. halshs-01759740

**HAL Id: halshs-01759740**

**<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-01759740>**

Submitted on 12 Apr 2018

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

**GIOVANNA ZAPPERI**

**BODY OF EVIDENCE, GESTURES OF DYSFUNCTION**  
**Technology as practice in the work of Natascha Sadr Haghigian**

*Texte zur Kunst*, n. 108, December 2017, pp. 86-101

The contemporary art field is a space in which it is possible to experiment with ways of doing politics. The question remains, however, as to what impact these self-declared political practices – both in (and out) of the art world – is capable of making. While activism is often present at art events (which are purportedly eager to support critical thinking and politicized perspectives), the material and discursive conditions of art's dissemination (i.e., powerful institutional apparatuses as filter) tend to neutralize political agency. Large-scale art exhibitions – such as, for example, Documenta 14 – are paradigmatic of precisely this dynamic wherein critical thinking is prized but also limited or self-contained.<sup>1</sup> Because activism tends to have a bad name in general, activist participation in art world circuits can offer some cultural validation. However, this comes with a loss of some degree of political efficacy for the sake of visibility. But there is also another, less obvious, dimension to this ambivalent position: its effect on the ontology and status of what is considered “contemporary art” at large, seeing as it forces one to ponder the distinctions between “art,” “evidence,” and “research,” or “subjectivity” and “objectivity.”

The collaboration between the Goldsmiths-based independent research center Forensic Architecture and the Society of friends of Halit – with reference to Halit Yozgat, killed in Kassel on April 6, 2006 by the neo-Nazi organization known as the NSU (National Socialist Underground) – is a case in point. The group's multi-part presentation, which dealt with the articulation of neo-Nazi terror and institutional racism in Germany, was centered around a video produced by Forensic Architecture titled, “77SQM\_9:26MIN” (2017), reconstructing the involvement of an undercover agent of the German intelligence service, Andreas Temme, who, though present at the time of the murder, was cleared in

---

<sup>1</sup> Some critics have pointed out the political relevance of certain works that most effectively addressed the state of democracy and social justice within Documenta's geo-political scope (which this year, directly connected Germany with Greece). See for example: T. J. Demos, “Learning from Documenta 14. Athens, post-democracy and decolonization”, *Third Text*, published online: <http://thirdtext.org/demos-documenta> ; see also Hili Perison, “The most important piece at Documenta 14 in Kassel is not an artwork. It's evidence”, *Art News*, 8 June 2017, published online: <https://news.artnet.com/exhibitions/documenta-14-kassel-forensic-nsu-trial-984701>

court.<sup>2</sup> The video recreates, both virtually (via 3D animation) and physically (via material reconstruction of the space), the scene of the crime and develops three possible scenarios, which together show that Temme's putative involvement in the killing is in fact very likely.

The video takes the form of an autonomous investigation and integrates technological and juridical expertise to effectively make a call for justice. Interestingly, the group's use of technology – despite the fact that this video was produced as part of an ongoing effort to reopen Temme's case and thus followed a specialized protocol of handling evidence that the space of art is unable to fully safeguard – had a special currency in an art context. The “technology,” (filmic animation, interactive cartographies, and 3D modeling) taken up by Forensic Architecture and which they deployed in a positivistic way, functioned as a tool to objectively test Temme's involvement. Although the inquiry ultimately failed in reopening the case, it nevertheless evidenced the political nature of the trial and succeeded in unveiling the connections between the state apparatuses and Germany's systemic racism.<sup>3</sup> For any who might be concerned about art's current fascination with right-wing imagery and new forms of technological fetishism, Forensic Architecture's activity and alternate engagement with technology should be very welcome.<sup>4</sup> Thus despite the collective's ambivalent positioning within the art world (neither born nor identified with it, and yet still participating in its structures), their work in an art context very productively stirs us to question technology's intersection with artistic production and whether objectivity as a formal grammar (instantiated by technological tools), can indeed be understood as an artistic form in itself.

Natascha Sadr Haghighian is an activist and artist who likewise occupies this ambivalent half-in, half-out art world position; she is one of the individuals involved in the collective initiative of “Unraveling the NSU complex” that commissioned Forensic Architecture's video. Her involvement in the project followed naturally from the productive entwinement

---

<sup>2</sup> The investigation was jointly commissioned by an alliance between art institutions and activist groups: the People's Tribunal “Unravelling the NSU Complex”, Haus Der Kulturen Der Welt (HKW), Initiative 6 April, and Documenta14. More detailed infos about the Tribunal can be found here: <http://www.nsu-tribunal.de>. For the results of Forensic Architecture's investigations, including the above mentioned video, see: [http://www.forensic-architecture.org/case/77sqm\\_926min/](http://www.forensic-architecture.org/case/77sqm_926min/)

<sup>3</sup> The results of the investigation were submitted to the Bundestag's and Hessen's parliamentary inquiries, but were rejected by an internal CDU report. Interestingly, the CDU report refers to Forensic Architecture as an “artist group” in order to discredit it. See Forensic Architecture's official response: [http://www.forensic-architecture.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/Response-to-CDU\\_2017.09.19.pdf](http://www.forensic-architecture.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/Response-to-CDU_2017.09.19.pdf).

<sup>4</sup> I am referring here to the works discussed by Anselm Franke and Ana Teixeira Pinto, “Post-political, post-critical, post-internet. Why can't leftist be more like fascists?”, *Open! Platform for Art, Culture, and the Public Domain*, September 8, 2016 <http://www.onlineopen.org/post-political-post-critical-post-internet>.

between political activism and a critical understanding of technology (i.e., maintaining a certain *disbelief* in it) that also characterizes her practice.

In what follows, I will look at some of Sadr Haghghian's recent works – specifically pieces that explore the current militarization of everyday life – to address the complex entwinement of art, politics, and technology. Generally speaking, technology is an omnipresent theme in her practice; it's an integral part of its content and materiality, as well as the viewer's experience of it. The works addressed here are ones that take the form of sculptural environments wherein everyday objects are activated by the viewer, sometimes suggesting the kind of interactivity typical of communication technologies. They are works that convey a fundamental distrust in technology's ability to provide a better life. And yet her aesthetic is devoid of the kind of apocalyptic or technophobic imagery one could expect from such circumspection. On the contrary, Sadr Haghghian brings a critical dimension to her framing of tech, through an edge of irony that points to the decidedly gendered dimension of technological development, especially that which intersects the military complex.

Natascha Sadr Haghghian's interest for military history and technologies started around 2012 in the framework of her project for Documenta 13: a work called "Trail," which comprised the construction of a footpath in Kassel's Karlsaue park, a public space formed in the wake of World War II atop the left-over war rubble. With this piece, the artist brought attention to the military industry that has historically shaped the city of Kassel, which, nearly destroyed by Allied bombings, re-established itself after post-war reconstruction as a node of the military industrial complex. In her subsequent explorations of the histories and technologies related to the military development, Sadr Haghghian has become particularly interested in the osmosis between sections of the society that are usually presented as separate, such as the local law enforcement and federal defense efforts. In her work *Pssst Leopard 2A7+*, the relation between military imagery and the gendered body emerges through the specific material strategies adopted by the artist. First presented in 2013 at König gallery in Berlin (but comprising a continuously developing sound component), this installation takes the spatial footprint of a battle tank (the Leopard 2A7) created by the German defense company Krauss-Maffei Wegmann as an armored vehicle intended for deployment in urban environments. Press materials for the tank speak of it being used in "Peace Support Operations." But its development around 2010, thus coinciding with the wave of revolutions that took place during the Arab Spring, suggest that "peace" in this formulation might better be replaced with "suppression of civilian dissent by

military means.”<sup>5</sup> Sadr Haghghian’s recreation of the vehicle is pointedly, farcically demilitarized, however, seeing as it’s built of shipping palettes surfaced in white, green, blue Legos (arranged in patches, like leopard spots or military camouflage), and features a circle of 60 headphone jacks outlining where the tank’s central turret would be.

Given that the body is a constant concern in Sadr Haghghian’s work, it is of particular note that in dealing with military technology and imageries she avoids any explicit representation of the human form, male or otherwise. Rather, she frames the viewer’s *own bodily experience*, by, for instance, creating a contrast with the body language one might normally associate with such an object. This model tank invites visitors to sit or lie on the platform and listen to different soundscapes that refer to the particular uses and history of this tank as if to share the not so hidden secret of the Leopard 2A7’s actual use.<sup>6</sup> Rendering the tank’s form an interactive playground, Sadr Haghghian reduces the Leopard’s roar to whisper by way of the viewers’ involvement. It is the listeners who climb aboard the model tank and who, in turn, consecrate the process of undermining the tank’s function that the artist has set in motion; it is the viewers who de-weaponize the idea of this object and who, as diverse civilians, likewise de-gender the cultural associations between boyhood and “playing war.” In so doing, it is also viewers who effectively mock the normative masculinity that traditionally comes with the representation of warfare.<sup>7</sup>

Associating sculpture with playground design also refers to conventional inscriptions of masculinity in modern art. *Pssst Leopard’s* flat, geometrical structure, with its grid-like array of the colored panels indeed alludes to minimalist sculptures, such as Carl Andre’s typical idiom of flat, serial arrangement of squares, as in his *37 Pieces of Work* (1970), with its references to industrial labor and materials. Or perhaps even more poignantly, it recalls Pino Pascali’s 1965 *Weapons (Le Armi)* series in which machines of violence were likewise converted into objects of play, specifically boys’ toys (although the referent warzone for this older series is Vietnam).<sup>8</sup> Both minimalist sculpture and Arte Povera’s version of the readymade indicate a time of industrial production, when the model of the factory work was in the process of being replaced by the immaterial labor and

---

<sup>5</sup> Note that this type of tank is currently operative in Qatar and other parts of the region.

<sup>6</sup> Some of these soundscapes can be found online: <http://possest.de/2013/12/31/pssst-leopard-2a7-2/>

<sup>7</sup> The army has historically played a crucial role in defining the modern contours of masculinity, notably through the formation of physically powerful bodies, bodies that are armed, impenetrable, and invariably gendered as male. See George Mosse, *The Image of Man. The Creation of Modern Masculinity*, Oxford, Oxford University Press 1998.

<sup>8</sup> Pascali stated that works in this series were designed to look like weapons *and* sculptures at the same time. See Alex Potts, “Autonomy in Post-War Art. Quasi Heroic and Casual”, *Oxford Art Journal*, vol. 27, n. 1, 2004, p. 183.

the technological environments to which Sadr Haghghian's work alludes.<sup>9</sup> If the reproduction of toy-like bombs, cannons, and machine guns was consistent with the staging of Pascali's hyperbolic masculinity – in which childhood memories are interpolated with the heroic image of the artist – Sadr Haghghian's *pssst Leopard 2A7+* unpacks both the cultural topos that reinforces the archetype of the hero-like (male) artist figure, as well as the canonical formal vocabulary of minimalist sculpture. *Pssst Leopard* proposes a different kind of sculpture, a sculpture exposing the symbolic and gendered connection of these tropes: the wild animal, the weapon, and the (male) artist.

The idea of developing a tank specifically designed for urban operations marks another piece of overlap between the history of civil society and the military industry. This osmosis, however, is not carried out just in the field of weapon manufacturing, but encompasses various aspects of everyday life, especially those involving technological innovation. Another recent project by Natascha Sadr Haghghian focuses on the question of the gaze and technology, with reference to the ways in which research initiated within the weapon industry has found its way into civilian use. The application CatchEye, for example, stems from the kind of explorations in 3D mapping that are common to the military tech industry; in this case, image correction software that could be incorporated into the programming of communicational apps like, say, Skype or WhatsApp. What CatchEye does is detect users' faces on screen and align their respective gazes to correct the phenomenon of parallax viewing (wherein lines of sight miss each other as each user looks at their screen rather than into the camera), creating the illusion that users are looking directly at each other and thus enhancing the sense of proximity and presence.

Sadr Haghghian's 2017 installation *Onco Mickey Catch*, includes this CatchEye software. In the work, two computer monitors are implanted on an animal-like form, so that the screens seem to literally originate from the headless body. The shape of the sculpture suggests an updated version of the "Vacanti mouse," a 1990s lab mouse famed for, thanks to science, growing the likeness of a human ear on its back. Further references contained in the title point to Disney's Mickey and to the OncoMouse™ (a breed of lab mouse optimized for cancer research on account of its susceptibility to the disease). Meanwhile, the sculptural taxidermy that serves as the base of this work suggests the anatomy of a mouse. And indeed a collapse of boundaries between the organic and the

---

<sup>9</sup> Natascha Sadr Haghghian has developed this point in some of her texts, where she muses on possible uses of technology; see in particular: "Disco Parallax", *e-flux journal*, n. 61, January 2015 <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/61/60991/disco-parallax/>. On the question of industrial and artistic labor in 1960s Italy and the U.S., see Jaleh Mansoor, *Marshall Plan Modernism. Italian Postwar Abstraction and the Beginnings of Autonomia*, Durham, Duke University Press 2016, pp. 140-151.

mechanic is precisely what the work drives at, implicating living bodies in the dissolution between techno-science and the entertainment industry.<sup>10</sup>

In *Onco Mickey Catch* the conflation of software, body, screen, and the gaze produces the representation of a dissolution of difference between the organic body and the technological apparatus. The staging of this mouse trio (to which one could add a fourth – the computer mouse) proposes a slippage between these items associated to three distinctive cultural sectors (entertainment, biotechnology, and computer sciences) resulting in a sort of dystopian Dada-like assemblage. This construction of organic and inorganic components is indeed reminiscent of the surrealist taste for absurd materialist encounters, such as, for example, Meret Oppenheim's famous 1936 *Fur Cup*, wherein a piece of a mammal's coat is affixed to the cold flat porcelain surface of a common consumer good. As with the aforementioned works by Sadr Haghigian, *Onco Mickey Catch* likewise invites the viewer to experience the work through some kind of physical interaction. The positions of the two screens in the work makes it is possible to video chat with the person sitting opposite; the incorporation of the CatchEye software enables a pair of users to locks eyes via screen. Given the close bodily proximity of the two users, the technology (originally designed to overcome the distance) as employed here renders the mediated encounter a caricature or pointless convenience.

In fact, "the gaze correction software that makes it possible to make eye contact, does not *allow* you to look away," as Sadr Haghigian has noted.<sup>11</sup> Beyond the mocking representation of this part-animal, part-dysfunctional machine, what is at stake is the pervasive application of biometric technologies of identification and surveillance in everyday life. In the cultural logic of the information age, the screen, per Jonathan Crary, is both the object of attention and the object that monitors, records, and references human behaviour.<sup>12</sup> The gaze of the screen reverses the gaze of the beholder, it "looks back" at the viewing subject, like a disembodied, mechanical eye. Referring to Donna Haraway, Sadr Haghigian also indicates the entanglement between such contemporary models of "absolute vision" and the genealogy of modern objectivity, based on the assumption of a

---

<sup>10</sup> Onco Mouse™ is a genetically modified, "trademark" animal created in the 1990s for the purpose of cancer research, specifically breast cancer. As Donna Haraway affirmed: "OncoMouse™ is my sibling, and more properly s/he, male or female, is my sister. [...] Her natural habitat, her scene of bodily/genetic evolution is the technoscientific laboratory and the regulatory institutions of a powerful nation-state", D. Haraway, *Modest\_Witness@Second\_Millennium.FemaleMan®\_Meets\_Oncomouse™: Feminism and Technoscience*, New York, Routledge 1997, p. 79.

<sup>11</sup> Natascha Sadr Haghigian, "Parallax", in Katrin Klingan et al. (eds), *Textures of the Anthropocene*, Cambridge, Mass., MIT Press 2015, p. 136.

<sup>12</sup> Jonathan Crary, *Suspension of Perception. Attention, Spectacle, and Modern Culture*, Cambridge, Mass., MIT Press 1999, p. 76.

non-marked (white, male) conquering subject of the gaze, to which Haraway opposes a feminist epistemology based on “partial perspective” and on a different understanding of objectivity.<sup>13</sup> The techniques of vision are questioned in their “ways of seeing” and their entanglement with power such that doubt is cast on the possibility that such visualization technologies could ever truly capture the full complexity of human interactions.

This inquiry into the circuits of power, vision, and technology asks whether present day techniques of vision can indeed be used to articulate, or perhaps even enact tactics of counter-visibility in a given social struggle. Sadr Haghghian uses her work to question emerging technology as the very site in which power relations are produced and enacted. To go back to the example of Forensic Architecture and their “extra-disciplinary”<sup>14</sup> formal language, the kind of critical examination carried out in Sadr Haghghian’s works rejects the language of objectivity that is necessary in the context of a trial. Rather, the specific visual and material qualities of her work align with those encompassed by the cultural idiom in which art historical references are connected to a number of contemporary social practices, thus clearly positioning her practice in the realm of art. Instead of providing professional (non-art) expertise, her productions suggest that parody can perform the work of critique. The point is not an exploration of political uses of technology, but one that takes technology itself as its object, unpacking its entanglement in a variety of social practices. One could argue that here we have two fundamentally distinct ways of understanding the relation between objectivity and politics: in the first case, technology is perceived as a tool that can be used in order to objectively interpret the facts (and in this case, call for justice); in the second, the elaboration of a specific idiom allows for a reconsideration of technological objectivity in its involvement with power.

Sadr Haghghian’s appraisal of the entwinement between power and technology is key to her avoidance of the type of mimicry that is currently so common in (mostly, although not exclusively, male) artists’ interest in the glossy surfaces of communication technologies.<sup>15</sup> Her works are indeed characterized by an anti-spectacular idiom, which includes a specific emphasis on everyday gestures and bodily experience, that can be read in the framework of an on-going feminist project of undermining the canonical inscriptions of greatness. This attitude opposes the aura of importance that typically

---

<sup>13</sup> Natascha Sadr Haghghian, “Parallax”, p. 138. See Donna Haraway’s notion of “situated knowledge” in: *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women. The Reinvention of Nature*, London, Routledge 1991, pp. 183-201.

<sup>14</sup> With reference to Brian Holmes’ definition of the “extra-disciplinary”. See: Brian Holmes, “L’Extradisciplinaire: critique des institutions artistiques”, *Multitudes*, n. 28, 2007, pp. 11-17.

<sup>15</sup> Here, again, I am referring to the kind of work that can be loosely associated with the so-called “post-internet style”, which was notably prominent in the 2016 Berlin Biennale.

comes with the representation of male activities across culture. Her distinctive humor is equally crucial in overcoming the oversimplified binarism of technophilia and technophobia, seeing as it emphasizes, instead, the subject's (or user's) agency over technology. Fascination is replaced by a more nuanced appraisal of the technological environment as structurally broken and dysfunctional, and yet deeply entwined in the definition of who we are. This is perhaps one of the reasons why her works leave so much space to the viewer: because the point is not to look at the technologically novel object itself – the flat screen as a contemporary fetish – but rather at how it informs the way we act and relate to each other. To engage with the technological object in such ways activates the viewer to override passive tendencies and attempt to interfere within the circuits of communication and control. Uses (and misuses) of technology in this work are thus explored via an array of small gestures of ordinary subversion. If communication technologies and power have always been intertwined, Sadr Haghghian creates interferences that engender acts of interruption with the aim of loosening control and exposing, via bodily person-to-person experience, the overload of meaning in which our lives are increasingly entangled.