

## ART IS A HACK: AN INTERVIEW WITH [!MEDIENGRUPPE BITNIK](#)

Interviewed conducted by Eryk Salvaggio, swissnex San Francisco

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### Hacking the Opera

**Eryk Salvaggio (ES):** How did you get started?

**Carmen Weisskopf (CW):** We've been working in and on the internet for more than 10 years. Our main interest is working with the contemporary, especially the way current technology is changing society. Certain themes are being redefined: truth, identity, cultural production. We've done a lot of work online. We like to leave the dedicated "art space" and introduce art into fields where art usually isn't. Of course, we work in galleries and museums, but we try to ask interesting questions. We'll ask where the field is, not where the arts are.

**Domagoj Smoljo (DS):** We met at art school in Zurich, started art in 2001 after the dot com crash. Networks were still an interesting new channel for reaching people who weren't in the same place as you. We found that "hacking" could inform our artistic practices, taking the term from internet culture and trying to use the same kinds of methods and strategies in the cultural field. We looked at society as a system, as an input and an output that we could tweak.

One of the first tests was placing bugs (audio transmitters) inside the Zurich Opera House. We retransmitted live shows for three months into a gallery space, with a telephone machine rebroadcasting (i.e., "robo-calling") the stolen feed to people at home. People would receive a call over a landline, and then there was a live connection to the performance.

## The Inside/Outside is Collapsing

*!Mediengruppe Bitnik's wireless camera interception devices on a dérive through San Francisco in 2014.*

**CW:** We came to swissnex in 2014, and we did surveillance dérives. We learned about these wireless cameras that worked through WiFi and weren't encrypted. So we invited people to come on dérives – a term from the Situationists, which they meant to be something like “getting lost in your own city.”

Our environment can become so familiar that we move through it without thinking. They were trying to get submerged into the subconscious of the city, and we wanted to get submerged into this layer of surveillance cameras. So we built a device that received images from those feeds.

**DS:** You would stand on the street, but see inside the buildings. Inside and out was totally collapsed.

**CW:** In Chinatown, we would see cameras positioned at the doorways of some of the semi-legal Mahjong parlors. On one of the walks, someone from a Chinese family joined us and told us all sorts of things about how the parlors worked – it opened a conversation about a hidden aspect of the city.

**DS:** It's like someone producing live television that nobody knows how to watch, 24/7, a media layer over the city.

**ES:** *Desperate times call for desperate measures, lol* (2017) seems to have a bit of that as well. All of the bots in this show have a home address in San Francisco, even if they turn out to be banks or falafel shops. It's something similar to that “media layer,” like an augmented reality of fantasy superimposed on the city.

**CW:** Right. After *Random Darknet Shopper* (2014), we were interested in these non-human entities. I think half of internet traffic now is non-human, which makes you think, who is this network for? When it started, there was so much hope for the internet – people connecting, Utopian visions. That passed, and now it's a place for machines. So we came out of *Random Darknet Shopper* with these ideas.

**ES:** For readers who don't know, *Random Darknet Shopper* was !Mediengruppe Bitnik's live artwork – quite literally a bot that would buy random things on the darknet, a secondary web where privacy protections are much stricter, and so there's a huge underground network where anyone can buy things, such as knock-off designer handbags or heroin. Your bot ended up [buying ecstasy and a fake LaCoste T-shirt](#), which were put on display.

**CW:** And after that, we came across this Ashley Madison website for adultery. The motto was “Life is short, have an affair”. They were hacked in 2015, and the whole backend was dumped on the internet along with user data and the CEO's emails. But what interested us most was the revelation that they were unable to attract women to the site. They had about 32 million male users and virtually no women, so they started operating with female chatbots.

For every exchange you had, you'd pay money. We tried it. For \$100, you didn't get to chat a lot! It was an example of a company being an early adopter for a certain kind of AI. These bots weren't at all clever, they were crudely done...

**DS:** We didn't know that in the beginning.

**CW:** We didn't, but it was an early attempt to kind of push AI and profit from it.

## A Choreography Written in Code

**DS:** We were interested in what this means for relationships. Does it matter? Can you have real feelings for something non-human? We were interested on two levels: how do you build this system? It was like an art piece, playing a game of is-it-real-or-not. The second was the conceptual approach: how did they engage a user? A bot shows up near you when you log in, sends a message when you log out. Another bot would appear to get you back to the site. This is all written out like a play. It's a choreography written in code.

**CW:** The bots were not at all clever, they had basic sentences, but the choreography was clever. There was a "motherbot" script which would produce "angels," which is what the bots were called. They would appear around you and disappear again. They had addresses, names, an age, the minimum amount of data required to show an identity online.

This system didn't work because of any intelligence on the bot's side. It was because they had built this system around dating, which is probably one of the best areas to do it, because people are quite patient and forgiving. If you change the topic or something, it's just a game, it's a flirtation. The bots wouldn't have worked on a business website where people asked questions, you wouldn't get away with it.

**ES:** Dating sites are working as a projection anyway. Even with humans – we hope it's a human, anyway – you're still bringing a kind of imaginary to a blank canvas, maybe a photo and some personal details. You inevitably invent a story for that person before you even meet.

**DS:** Exactly, and that's why we say the experience, for users, was real! It's not a fake experience.

**CW:** That's what we mean by the categories changing. What is real or true in an environment like that? We need to think of these categories differently. Just because an experience is virtual doesn't mean it's not real, or doesn't affect you. It can depress you or make you happy just the same. It's important to give that life to these bots. In San Francisco there were 270 bots, we now have the 51 closest to Pier 17 in this space as a means of giving them a body within the city.

## Do you want to connect?

**DS:** A lot of our work is about communication. I liked that Ashley Madison was a communication platform, but that you were unable to communicate. You were unable to speak to any women, but you were also unable to speak about your experience to anyone. It wasn't something they could speak about with their wife –

**CW:** "I've just spent hundreds of dollars on a dating site trying to cheat on you..."

**DS:** "...and they were bots!" You couldn't say that to your friends, you'd feel kind of stupid. You end up very alone. This is a space where things fall apart, and shows us the mechanics of it.

**ES:** What do you think is on the horizon? How do we prepare for it?

**CW:** People are realizing that apps change our environment, for example, a taxi app changes how we interact with a city. I think the enthusiasm is slowly starting to give way to a more realistic view. It's not enough to have Uber, you have to think about the people being moved by it. What are the consequences? Do we want people to be moved that way? These questions are a good start. It's a negotiation, we're asking more from our technology. We don't just want a taxi app, we want a good taxi app. But we have to define what "good" means.

We've been looking at the Internet of Things, all these devices connecting to the internet now. It doesn't seem like an entirely good idea! But our children will probably be living in a world that's even more connected than we are today. We've normalized things, too, because you can't opt out anymore. We grew up in a world where there was a "being offline." Those spaces are becoming rarer.

**ES:** What do you think art can reveal that a corporation or a policy think-tank can't, or wouldn't?

**CW:** Art can create reflective spaces to ask questions that aren't part of the corporate world or even the "user sphere." There's never a total outside, but art allows us to step back and look at the mechanics. What are the ethics we should develop? In the case of Ashley Madison, we ask what intimacy is, if it can be created in this very crude relationship? Will people become more sensitive to it?

It's human, to create intimacy with devices and give them agency. "What's my computer doing?" We need spaces where we can think about that relationship. But then as artists, we don't have solutions.