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PRISM is disabled at Transmediale



PRISM: The Beacon Frame

PRISM: The Beacon Frame from Julian Oliver and Danja Vasiliev was essentially banned from the weekend's Transmediale art/tech festival in Berlin. The equipment used to run the work was removed by Transmediale's technical contractors, with a threat that switching it on would result in a call to the police.

As we recently reported, the work is a (quote) "fully functional response to the general absence of information as to what NSA PRISM equipment actually looks like." It is made up of a small Linux computer, wireless adapter, and glass prism. "Activating" the case makes the prism rotate, while the computer listens for the connection requests from computers and devices to local wireless access points. The hostname and hardware ID of the device is projected through the prism, giving a panoramic view of what's happening on local networks.

After the disabling of the work, Julian and Danja issued the following statement:

We, the creators of 'PRISM: The Beacon Frame', wish to express our disappointment at the disabling of a crucial element of this work at Transmediale 2014, with the threat of reporting us to the German Federal Police.

As such we've agreed that it is not in our interests to maintain the work in its original form.

It was our intention to provide an opportunity for public to critically engage precisely the same methods of cellular communications interception used by certain governments against their own people and people in sovereign states. It was not, in any way, our

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intention to harm anyone and nor did we.

We note that the German Parliament, right next door, has suffered directly by way of such violations.

It is vital that technology-based art remain a frame with which we can develop critical discourses about the world we live in, from the engineered to the cultural and political. Sometimes that requires that we are not limited by exaggerated fears and legal definition, but that we act proportionally and with conscience in our efforts to understand the power struggles and tensions in our (technically mediated) environment.

Sometimes this means taking risks, risks without intention to harm but to engender wider critical insights.

We wish to thank the Festival Director and the Curatorial Team from ArtHackDay and LEAP for representing us to the best of their ability.

"The Critical Engineer considers the exploit to be the most desirable form of exposure."

Julian Oliver and Daniil Vasiliev
<http://criticalengineering.org>

As Julian later said in a [tweet](#), "Most people found our intervention nothing short of revealing and funny. [It was] only 'hard' because it exposed swindle of techno-trust."

We'll let you know if anything further comes out of this; Transmediale is now over, making it perhaps less likely that they will issue a statement. However, it does raise serious questions as to the impact of digital artworks and their effect on any legal and/or editorial framework which their exhibitors may have.

UPDATE 04/02/14: We have been contacted by Olof Mathé, one of the Art Hack Day organisers, who sent us this statement in support of Julian Oliver and Danja Vasiliev.

Why the partial dismantling of "PRISM: The Beacon Frame" is unnerving

Danja Vasiliev and Julian Oliver's work "PRISM: The Beacon Frame", made and shown during Art Hack Day Berlin, was partially taken down on Friday Jan 31, 2014 after threats of reporting to the German Federal Police.

"PRISM: The Beacon Frame" is as visually stunning as it is technically audacious. It uses wireless interception to project device information through a prism onto the surrounding walls resulting in an impressive and ominous lightshow. People close to the installation receive eerie yet playful text messages. It raises questions around our exploitative relationship to critical infrastructure. As such, it was universally acclaimed by visitors to the exhibition.

In a certain light, it's ironic that a component of the installation be taken down since it merely re-articulates some of the core questions raised by the piece: Who controls our infrastructure? Why is certain technology the prerogative of those in power? How can we foster public debate around the ramifications of technological choices?

The threat of reporting to the police is equally ironic and sad. It's ironic because the work highlights the violations the German Parliament, next door to the exhibition hall and the

epitome of power, has been exposed to. It's sad because the type of pseudo-"citizen's arrest" Danja and Julian were victims of is the hallmark of the faceless bureaucracy and tacit obedience on which many power structures rely. Furthermore, the threat brings back unpleasant memories of absurdly draconian penalties for 'computer'-related crimes, as was the case with Jeremy Hammond and the late Aaron Schwartz.

How can we encourage critical inquiry into our technologically mediated environment if not through works like "PRISM: The Beacon Frame"? Art Hack Day was initiated with the express purpose of providing a haven for hackers whose medium is art and artists whose medium is tech to express themselves to their fullest ability, much like Julian and Danja advocate in their Critical Engineering manifesto. The partial dismantling of "PRISM: The Beacon Frame" is therefore unnerving. It shows how much work remains before we can genuinely begin to examine the technological underpinnings of power, society and culture.

Olof Mathé, one of many Art Hack Day organizers

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Paul is the publisher of Imperica.