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## DIGITAL HUNTERS: TECHNO-TERRITORIES IN THE AGE OF COMPUTATIONAL SURVEILLANCE

### **Abstract**

As the infrastructure of the internet continues to expand, networked computational surveillance becomes an essential practice of territorial and biopolitical control. The feedback loop between information technologies and global structures of power creates new territorial and biopolitical regimes that sanction the mobility of people and information across Earth. These new 'techno-territories' lead to the emergence of new agents of power, who weave virtual and material worlds together in order to exercise control over these new spaces and the bodies that flow through them. This article discusses the emergence of 'digital hunters' as both subjects and objects of power through a discursive analysis of *AZ: move and get shot* (2011-2014) and *The Virtual Watchers* (2016), two artworks by Joana Moll based on research into crowdsourced surveillance systems at the US/Mexico border. Through a discussion of these projects I trace the emergence of digital hunting as a new practice of territorial control through networked images, as citizens are militarized through participatory architectures of surveillance and social media.

**APRJA Volume 9, Issue 1, 2020**  
**ISSN 2245-7755**

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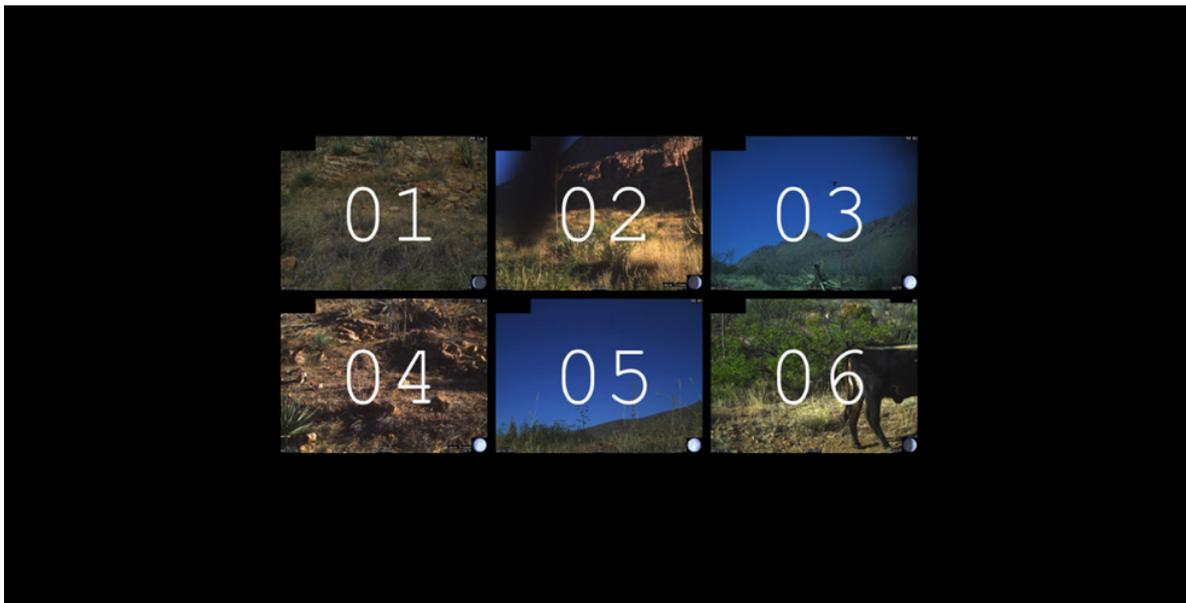


Figure 1: The six independent videos that compose the online piece *AZ: move and get shot* by Joana Moll. Courtesy of the artist.

## Introduction

The flow of information and people across Earth has profoundly shifted as physical and virtual borderlands become more intimately entangled. As global network capitalism continues to expand (Fuchs 110), new geopolitical borders are created at the intersection of contested geographic delimitations and digital interactive interfaces. These intersectional spaces—which I refer to as ‘techno-territories’—are defined by an interplay between participation and exclusion as mutually constitutive processes. Internet users participate in increasingly interactive platforms, creating global communities of exchange. However, participatory interfaces are simultaneously used to surveil and control the mobility of human actors across new techno-territorial boundaries, controlling the mobility of people at the frontiers of globalism’s imagined communities. The hunt for undesired immigrants in these

techno-territories through contemporary electrical networks engenders a new political agent of the information age, which I call the ‘digital hunter’.

In order to trace the emergence of digital hunting as a practice of territorial power, this paper discusses two artworks by Joana Moll, which emerge from five years of research into Wireless Border Cams (WBC) and Blue Servo, two crowdsourced surveillance platforms at the US/Mexico border. The first project that Moll developed between 2011 and 2014 was *AZ: move and get shot*, which is based on six online surveillance cameras placed by landowners at the US/Mexico border in Arizona. Triggered by a motion sensor, the cameras captured the movement of human and non-human agents through image sequences that were automatically uploaded to a server and displayed on a dedicated website. Moll developed an algorithm that detected and retrieved every new image uploaded to this platform, in order to automatically assemble them on the AZ project’s website. Through the span of four years the algorithm created six independent videos, which show the sequences of images from each one of the six tapped cameras (see fig. 1).

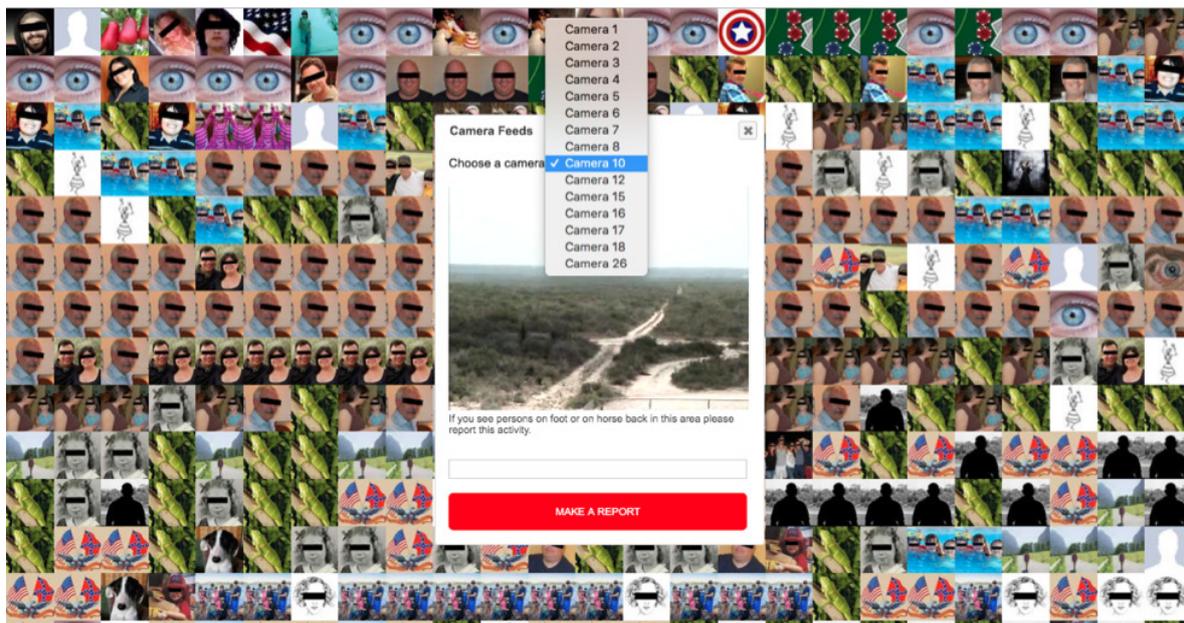


Figure 2: *The Virtual Watchers* by Joana Moll, an online project that shows the chronological history of the Blue Servo Facebook group, and replicates some of the Blue Servo original interface design. Courtesy of the artist.

Moll's second project for analysis, *The Virtual Watchers* (2016), visualizes the interactions between users of a Facebook group created by volunteers at Blue Servo, another online platform to surveil the US/Mexico border. The interface provided 24/7 access to images from a network of 200 cameras and sensors along strategic sites of the borderline, and allowed users to make anonymous reports to border enforcement authorities. Moll's piece consists of an interactive archive of the original conversations on the Facebook group, and some of the original videos and interface design from the Blue Servo website (see fig. 2). By focusing on the use of social media that enhances the control of techno-territories at the US/Mexico border, *The Virtual Watchers* uncovers digital hunting as a community practice fueled by affective social spectacle.

The lives of users who navigate through participatory web interfaces is constructed by the images that they create and use, blurring the line between image and reality (Flusser

10). In this case, US citizens who inhabit the techno-territories offered by WBC and Blue Servo develop new territorial relationships to the US/Mexico border through the images they consume. Even though the intended purpose of these systems is to involve citizens in capturing undocumented immigrants crossing the US/Mexico border, *AZ: move and get shot* reveals that most of the images on these platforms captured the movement of nature and the pace of a changing landscape. This seemingly useless flow of territorial images, however, serves a crucial role: it *creates the border as an image*, constituting the techno-territories inhabited and controlled by digital hunters.

As digital hunters exert biopolitical control over emerging techno-territories, they interact through social media platforms in order to sustain their communities. At the same time that digital hunters create their online communities aimed at catching immigrants, Facebook trackers hunt down hunters' personal data in order to sell it to the best bidder (Zuboff 160). Digital hunters are both subjects and objects of power under global network capitalism, caught in a system whose main purpose is to sustain the flow of capital and

information at the expense of unsanctioned bodies and citizen privacy. In a sense it could be argued that digital hunting is a practice of power that lies at the core of contemporary information capitalism.

## **Borders and mobility in a time of techno-territorial capitalism**

Global capitalism is characterized by a two-fold relation to mobility across international borders: while frontiers are enforced in order to restrict the mobility of unsanctioned bodies, the very same spaces are opened to the flows of capital and data (Hyndman 316; Martin 356). As digital data becomes one of the world's most valuable assets, the material infrastructure of the internet through which this new gold flows is mostly granted safe passage across borders. The virtual worlds created by the circulation of data coalesce with the material borders that the internet's infrastructure permeates, creating new biopolitical regimes of mobility across the techno-territories I refer to. The internet allows information to travel as a commodity while at the same time it allows digital hunters to frustrate the mobility of people deemed as undesired by global governance systems.

Borders are historical constructs that arise from contested social relations (Paansi 23), creating the condition of impenetrability that defines the sovereignty of states and subjects, both human and non-human (Latour 311). In this sense, the US/Mexico border is a shifting meaning-making space that emerges from a history of colonial dispossession and war; white US nationalists see it as the ultimate boundary of their imagined homeland, and immigrants experience it as the passage to a better reality that is, in turn, violently

denied. These tensions are exacerbated by the omnipresence of cameras connected to global information networks, as governance systems upgrade their control mechanisms towards fields of vision and power that were not previously available (Bratton 8). Even though crowdsourced surveillance technologies did not create immigrants and nature as objects of power, the interactive interfaces uncovered by Moll's work open new biopolitical possibilities to control the flow of people across boundaries at a distance. US citizens/users who hunt for images of immigrants through these platforms, are granted the power of seeing like a state: a disembodied and decentralized governance infrastructure that sanctions the flow of bodies across geopolitical boundaries.

The border as image and as physical space is the techno-territory occupied both by immigrants and digital hunters, albeit in dissimilar ways. The concept of techno-territories that I suggest in this paper relies on the notion of territoriality as a process that emerges from coding and decoding the interactions of subjects and objects with a given space (Deleuze and Guattari 320), mediated by economic and extra-economic logistics, sociopolitical institutions, and technologies (Ó Thuatail 90). Contemporary territories are increasingly defined by new technologies of vision, which lead image and world to become convoluted versions of each other (Steyerl). Computer technologies are increasingly blurring the boundaries between Earth and its simulations, as the possibility for seeing and controlling a particular territory does not depend anymore upon proximity. Techno-territories are, therefore, natural ecosystems cut through by geopolitical dynamics and intersected by contemporary computer infrastructures and interactive interfaces.

The geopolitical dynamics that emerge from the current rise of far-right governments across the world increase global tensions

over contested borders. In the case of the US/Mexico, the border wall has become one of the foundational images of Trump's conservative agenda fueled by xenophobic and racist rhetoric. In order to cater and exacerbate its follower's anti-immigration views, Trump's government insists on creating a live-broadcasting service of the construction of the new US/Mexico border wall.[1] What is key for Trump's administration is not the efficacy of the physical wall—heavily contested by recent reports[2]—but the border wall as a collective image. The wall live-broadcasting initiative by Trump's government reveals the importance of networked architectures of vision as mechanisms to generate the wall *as an image*, which is, arguably, more efficient than the wall itself in exerting territorial control.

Digital hunters spend hours looking at images from this techno-border between the US and Mexico, in search for the faintest trace of undocumented immigration. A series of interactive buttons allow them to report and connect to the border patrol authorities, usually leading to interdictions at the sites that are surveilled. However, beyond the real efficacy of these platforms in stopping undocumented immigration, they seem most efficient at keeping users watching the border (Moll 160). The effectiveness of these surveillance images does not lie with the number of immigrants that users are able to catch, but in the creation of digital hunters as a remote paramilitary force that patrols the borders of informational capitalism. Citizens are seduced into a militarized relation to the state, as they are turned into digital hunters in order to fill in a power vacuum opened by contemporary information systems.

The US/Mexico borderland is, thus, a complex techno-territorial system composed of intersecting layers of natural, technological, and sociopolitical flows. The Facebook group exposed by Moll's *The*

*Virtual Watchers* reveals how social media is a tool effectively used for techno-territorial control, as it allows digital hunters to create the online communities that consolidate their xenophobic tendencies. Moll's project shows that participation and domination, typically described as two distinct modes of networked social structures (Fuchs 343), are mutually constitutive, since digital hunters dominate the flow of sanctioned bodies at the border through means of virtual participation. The crowdsourced border surveillance platforms become pedagogical tools for new far-right governments, which render the border as a stable visual regime.

## Hunted images

The services provided by WBC, which are exposed by Moll's work, uncover a profound relationship between hunting and image technologies. The cameras used by the landowners in their private properties are also distributed by WBC, whose website currently redirects to Buck Eye Cam (BEC), a surveillance camera seller that mostly targets border security and hunting industries. [3] The same networked image technologies used to hunt animals for sport are used to hunt immigrants crossing the border. As the processes of looking and capturing become increasingly entangled both in symbolical and material dimensions, the relationship between image-making technologies and biopolitical control is sharpened.

Photographic language has multiple roots in hunting terminology, as the rifle's telescopic aiming sight was replaced by the camera's viewfinder (Sontag 11). Susan Sontag described this transition at the African safari, as photographers shifted from animal-trophies to image-trophies, charging film cartridges instead of guns, and shooting

pictures instead of bullets. The bond between the act of killing and the act of shooting a picture grows even deeper at the moment in which digital images travel at unprecedented speeds across a global infrastructure of interconnected screens. The relationship between hunting and images is exacerbated in the age of contemporary surveillance, where being recorded threatens the very existence of the image's subject. The cameras at the US/Mexico border shoot immigrants and non-human actors as they cross the borderland, reverting the camera back to its principal function: to freeze life through shooting the desired subject. In this case, quite literally.

Yet, human hunting is not a practice that originates in computational surveillance technologies. From lynching to headhunting, bounty hunters, and cowboy hunting of indigenous people in colonial regimes, undesired people and non-humans are all piled up in the same underclass by ruling colonial systems. Hunting animals as a sport, as well as hunting the Other, has been a practice of colonial anthropocentric power throughout history. As a colonial practice, hunting is upgraded through new technical capabilities of image-making and information sharing, as digital hunters sanction the mobility of bodies deemed as undesired by dominant geopolitical actors. The anti-immigration rhetoric of governments such as Trump's fuels hunting as a biopolitical force of territorial control, which is now assisted by faster and expanding digital networks of global information.

Mostly composed of low angles, the images in *AZ: move and get shot* show a point of view akin to a camouflaged animal waiting to catch its prey. Even though the movements of a photographer lying in wait are very similar to a predator stalking its prey (Flusser 33), digital hunters do not stalk their prey on site since their hunting grounds exist within a network of multiple visual fields. Digital hunters are not the operators of the photographic

apparatus—which is automated by a sensor—but are the consumers of these images on the other side of the screen, miles away from their immediate field of vision. Digital hunters, therefore, perform a double camouflage: their surveillance cameras are hidden on the physical territory, and their bodies are entirely displaced from the scene through the use of the internet's network.

This surveillance infrastructure becomes an invisibility cloak, turning spectacle into an effective act of power. The predatory act of taking a picture (Sontag 10), transitions from the symbolical to the real through the possibilities opened by global networks of information. The internet deterritorializes digital hunters from their immediate localities, and reterritorializes them into the border as spectators through networked systems of vision. In this scenario, the state's territorial sovereignty is partially transferred to digital hunters as subjects of power of the technoterritories they inhabit. In the age of technoterritorial sovereignty, watching and hunting become convoluted processes through systems of digital surveillance.

## Digital hunting: between desire and control

The virtual watchers exposed by Moll's project are phantasmagoric and disembodied hunters capable of exercising control through the act of looking—and eventually reporting. Even if the images are not taken by them, digital hunters actualize their meaning through making use of them. *The Virtual Watchers* shows the number of interactive features in the Blue Servo website, through which users could switch views from multiple cameras and click on a button to make reports. Most of the comments evidenced in *The Virtual Watchers* are based on faint impressions of

movement: participants are usually not sure if what they saw was an immigrant, an officer, an animal, etc. The point is that they see something, report it, and eventually become the initiators of a detention; only then can they claim their image-trophy.

As citizens are militarized through this architecture of vision and interactivity, the territorial power of governing institutions exponentially grows. The state offloads its securitization by means of crowdsourcing, militarizing civilians through systems of free labor. Moll claims that Blue Servo's users initiated 5,331 interdictions which represent approximately one million hours of free labor for border authorities (Moll 158). Through the use of interactive platforms and of social media, the community of digital hunters that emerged from Blue Servo created a decentralized force fed by the desire of participating in the securitization of their country. Social media paired with crowdsourced surveillance systems become a much more efficient and cheap way to ensure territorial control than traditional patrolling.

Digital hunters often complain when they are not able to see the detention that results from their reports. After disclosing to the Facebook group that she had been watching for over seven hours at Blue Servo's interface, one of the users felt "disgusted" because she did not get to see the interdiction that resulted from her report. She writes, "...why should I continue to watch and report when we don't get to see at least some of the outcome?". The anxiety expressed by this user emerges from the inability to claim the ultimate image-trophy of digital hunting—the evidence of the user's power. Under this scenario, surveillance and spectacle become convoluted into the very same process, and biopolitical power is turned into an interactive videogame.

These participatory platforms use the lure of interactivity in order to produce a

border that resembles a video game, enhanced by the affection in which social media sites are based upon. In addition to Blue Servo's interface design, the Facebook group enabled digital hunters to create affective bonds between themselves, as a community of little brothers—as opposed to a single Big Brother (Guzik 6)—fully dedicated to the protection of their territorial identity from what they perceive as an immigrant threat. When some of the users manifest disappointment on the Facebook group, others jump in to encourage them to keep watching and helping to securitize the US/Mexico border (see fig. 3). The surveillance complex tapped by Moll enables the creation of a team of immigrant hunters assisted by image-making technologies and social media, invested in the process of controlling the mobility of the undesired other.

As the internet becomes a predominant site for affective interaction, this model of surveillance through participation creeps into every single aspect of life. The god-like vision of digital hunters is mirrored by the vision of social media algorithms, which collect data on user interactivity in order to sell it to the best bidder and feed the vaults of big tech companies (Zuboff 35). Companies such as Facebook use multiple web technologies, such as trackers and GPS locations, in order to surveil their users and sell their data mainly for marketing purposes. The transnational cyber-empires inaugurated by these companies normalize surveillance as an economic and political force. Tech-corporations hunt for user data across the globe, just as digital hunters hunt for images of immigrants at the border. In sum, digital hunting emerges as a key practice at the core of the geopolitical dynamics under surveillance capitalism.



Figure 3: One of the many conversations shown at *The Virtual Watchers*, between a disillusioned digital hunter and another one cheering her up.

## Conclusion

The networks inhabited by internet users are both material and imaginative, as the territorial control exerted by digital hunters is fueled by a desire to protect their country from undesired immigrants. The crowdsourced surveillance platforms exposed by Moll's work function both to reinforce the alleged US/Mexico border and to create new realms of territorial sovereignty. Online interactive surveillance at the US/Mexico border creates new techno-territorial domains, as users hunt immigrants through participatory interfaces that allow them to report what they deem as suspicious activity. Networked images that flow through the internet are turned, in this scenario, into the weapons of digital hunters who patrol the borders of their imagined national community.

*AZ: move and get shot* and *The Virtual Watchers* reveal the creation of the US/Mexico border as an interactive interface through the use of technologies of vision, and foresee the emergence of new fields of power created through participatory surveillance technologies. These two artworks unveil the materiality of the digital revolution, as it deeply alters the processes of territorialization and deterritorialization of the contemporary world. The US/Mexico border becomes an interactive platform that provides users with a telematic agency over the territories they desire to control. Digital hunters emerge as new subjects/objects of surveillance capitalism, as they weave together material and virtual worlds through active practices of power.

Hunting, as an analytical tool, emphasizes the exercise of biopolitical and territorial control through information networks. Surveillance capitalism is based on the idea of a generalized system of data exploitation, where the images and data are stripped

away from the subjects of representation for the sake of profit. However, digital hunting provides a much more accurate understanding of biopolitical power, as it refers to the technologically mediated relation between users and bodies deemed as undesired. Digital hunters become active participants of dominant states of power, controlling the flow of bodies through the US/Mexico border and providing considerable amounts of free labor in the task of surveilling the borderlands. Networked architectures of vision paired with the participatory nature of contemporary informational networks, have the capacity to turn citizen-users into both a military force and an unpaid worker.

Contemporary digital platforms set the stage for multiple types of digital hunters. While some hunters use participatory online platforms to enforce territorial and biopolitical control, other hunters perform critical approaches to the same interfaces. For example, Moll reverses the expected use of the very same digital infrastructures used to surveil the US/Mexico border, revealing the interface itself instead of using it to catch immigrants. In this sense, there is a constant negotiation between users and the online interfaces, mediated by a set of ideologies and intentions that, in this case, separate US nationalists from an artist. Nevertheless, Moll is also a digital hunter in the Facebook group and the surveillance platforms, counter-surveilling the activity of users in order to reveal the power dynamics at play. The difference between multiple types of digital hunting, and their relation to ideology, image-trophies, and territories, would be the subject of further research.

In this paper, I have shown how the digital communities created by digital hunters on social media are, in the end, at the service of Facebook's algorithmic surveillance. The more Facebook communities interact amongst themselves the more information

flows into their servers, which is quickly processed by algorithms and sold as data points to the best bidder. This generalized state of surveillance reveals what is at the core of contemporary networked capitalism: an extraterritorial economic and political force assisted by the latest technological advancements. As digital hunters hunt immigrants at the US/Mexico border, Facebook's algorithms hunt down social media user data. The internet, in this sense, becomes an infrastructure that fosters nationalist and xenophobic territorial control while simultaneously allowing digital information to flow as a commodity. Machine, companies, and state collapse into a single force, as new technologies of vision and participatory platforms claim territorial sovereignty.

## Notes

[1] In an article for *The Washington Post*, Nick Miroff reports that Jarred Kushner, Trump's son-in-law and senior advisor, is pushing for the creation of the live-broadcasting system of the border wall construction.

[2] Miroff has also reported on the strategies that smugglers are using to saw their way through the new border wall, using simple tools to create a person-sized hole in approximately twenty minutes.

[3] Sean White, one of BEC's owners, maintains a personal blog where he dedicates an entire entry to the use of his company's equipment in the hunting industry.

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