

Harvesting Patterns of Your Life or a Self-Portrait from the Perspective of a Failure or a Drone, Hovering Above

1

Do you know what a ‘signature strike’ is? Let’s clear the air for the context first. In his book *Drone theory* (2015) Grégoire Chamayou quotes *The New York Times* and other sources and explains that every week or so, more than 100 members of the national security apparatus of the USA gather, by secure video teleconference, to discuss terrorist suspects’ biographies and recommend to the President who should be the next to die: “Once established, the list of nominees is sent to the White House, where the president orally gives his approval to each name. With the ‘kill list’ validated, the drones do the rest.”

Chamayou continues: “Apart from these ‘personal strikes’, there are also ‘signature strikes’, here meaning strikes authorized on the basis of traces, indications, or defining characteristics. Such strikes target individuals whose identity remains unknown but whose behaviour suggests, signals, or signs membership of a ‘terrorist organization.’

In such cases, the strike is made ‘without knowing the precise identity of the individuals targeted’. It depends solely on their behaviour, which, seen from the sky, appears to ‘correspond to a signature of pre-identified behaviour that the United States links to militant activity’. Today, strikes of this type, against unknown suspects, appear to constitute the majority of cases”.¹

Later Chamayou explains that “an analysis of the pattern of a person’s life may be defined more precisely as ‘the fusion of link analysis and a geospatial analysis.’ For some idea of what is involved here, imagine a superimposition, on a single map, of Facebook, Google Maps, and an Outlook calendar. This would be a fusion of social, spatial, and temporal particulars; a mixed mapping of the *socius*, *locus*, and *tempus* spheres – in other words, a combination of the three dimensions that, not only in their regularities but also in their discordances, constitute a human life”.²

2

No wonder this kind of data-biography sometimes fails to correctly describe its suspects, so that everyone in the surroundings gets killed while unaware of the ‘irregularities’ of their ‘signature’ behaviour. There is another lesson to learn here – more and more often our lives and biographies, even our autobiographies, are written by others, including machines, by our enemies we don’t even suspect we have. This kind of data-based pattern analysis

is both an autobiography and a biography at the same time – the pattern is drawn by its subject and the results are analysed according to algorithms, machinery, and rules unknown to or independent from its subject.

3

The completely opposite of the aforementioned way of collecting or writing a biography or a personal profile is a widely popular one. It may easily be found on the list of the top 20 biography bestsellers at airport bookshops near you – the autobiographies or authorized biographies of celebrities: football players and managers, singers, models, and entrepreneurs. The difference here is an obvious one. Celebrities have the privilege of ‘curating’ their biographies or at least are paid well for non-interference, while the so called terrorist suspects get their activity-based association data file with its metadata compiled under a name or pseudonym where “once it becomes thick enough, it will constitute a death warrant.”³

4

Gibrann, 7 hrs ago, Facebook:
“The Internet is learning more about us than us about it.”

5

A canonical formula for a short bio. For example: “Call her Ishmael. Ishmael is an artist and a writer. She shares her time between here and there.”

6

Written from a third-person perspective, the autobiography becomes an abstraction. And an abstraction is something already given, like language, to use a well-known example. We start learning language using examples. We start our lives by copying the lives of others. We write our autobiographies by copying others’.

7

Either you know where you are or you know where you’re going, but never both at the same time. Or everyone else knows who you are but then you can’t make a move. This is how writing or reading an autobiography from a quantum or casino perspective would start, right?

I used to start and finish like this: “VK (b. 1977, in Kaunas, Lithuania) lives and works between Athens and Vilnius.” The sentence fails at numerous points. Even politically. Lithuania was part of the USSR in 1977. So factually, I was born in the USSR. However this is not so either if we look from the Lithuanian perspective. You see, Lithuania had been occupied by the USSR since 1940, and an occupation is an illegal act in itself, meaning that being born in Soviet Union makes you a collaborator, a denier of the occupation.

And another one. Why do we – artists, curators, writers, etc. – always say “(insert your name here) lives and works there and there” as if we haven’t learned numerous lessons from Allan Kaprow or Mladen Stilinović or Jonas Mekas or Robert Filliou, who proved that life is more interesting than art and defined art as something that makes life more interesting than art. When exactly did we become office employees and begin to categorize life under life and art under work?

What about starting a bio from the story of how my mother met my father in a specific field shaped by specific features of local geography and state capitalism aka the Soviet Communist society of the late 70s in some restaurant in a provincial airport called Wings? Well, originality is important to us too, right? And this line has already been taken. This is how artist Olof Olsson starts his autobiography, and turns it into just another stand-up comedy routine. “Olof Olsson is the product of the emerging charter tourism of the 1960s – his Dutch mother and Swedish father met in Mallorca.”⁴

Isn’t the myth of the individual, of the self, another problematic part of the self-portrait, the concept of autobiography? Ask the bacteria, protists and fungi that constitute 90 percent of your body genome; ask Karen Barad, the theorist behind the concept of agential realism; ask your grandmother, if in doubt.

Mohammad, 1 min. ago, Vancouver, Canada, Facebook: “... the unified self has never existed in the first place and here the neurophilosopher Thomas Metzinger is due a quick mention. His main point is that there is “no such thing as a self” that actually exists. The self is generated by the brain which is an information-processing system that gathers data to construct each individual’s blend of selfhood. But, because we do not have access to this technical process it’s impossible to live without these selves that are more like flocking clusters of information.”⁴

And the biggest problem is the life itself – do I really lead a life worth mentioning to others, especially compared with those who, although less privileged, risked their lives to save ideals, or others, or both? It’s not about the place you were born into; it’s more about what you have done, what you have done for others, right?

A CV is a self-portrait but also an autobiography, a hybrid of theory and practice called your life. You start writing it. You sit down in a café or a kitchen or at the airport. You start by recalling which part of your life you experienced as yours and is worth mentioning. You end up writing “VK (b. 1977, in Kaunas) is a curator or writer who lives and works from Vilnius, Lithuania.”

You start mentioning cities you have lived in or aspire to live in, which you often travel to; you have or had a gallery or a show there or there; solo and group shows, in carefully selected lists; or you just want to look cosmopolitan with a twist of some exotic locality, or just plainly a global player, a part of a jet-set society of the *crème de la crème*; but Vegan and gluten-free, a drop from the fountainhead of liquid modernity, with your dripping foot in Athens, a thumb in Basel, an index finger in Cairo, a nose in Miami, a wallet in NYC, and a charity in Zanzibar. Your bio is the proof that you see contemporary art as an integral part of a global neoliberal system, and you are its agent.

You may sound fictional but you are not imaginary. Or, you may look imaginary but you are fictional. Semi-fictional but based on biographical facts. Well, everyone is now part of some sort of fiction. A fictional artist or group, a fictional gallery, a fictional institution: our reality is being fictionalized at the level where talking about fiction is itself *passé*, in the same way as the term *passé* is *passé*. “If the fictional artist feels like more of a problem than a solution in 2015, this is related to the obvious fact that self-creation is now the norm,” writes Martin Herbert while surveying a new wave of fictional group artists’ exhibitions.⁵

If you are not a sharer in privilege, or even if you are a part of the so-called first world, the outside world sometimes creates your biography for you in the most drastic way. How many of you have heard of Khaled El-Masri, “a German national, who was seized by Macedonian security officers on the eve on December 31, 2003, because he had been mistaken for an Al-Qaeda suspect with a similar name. He was held incommunicado and abused in Macedonian custody for 23 days, after which he was handcuffed, blindfolded, and driven to Skopje Airport, where he was handed over to the CIA and severely beaten. The CIA stripped, hooded and shackled El-Masri and sodomized him with a suppository as Macedonian officials stood by at the airport. The CIA then drugged him and flew him to Kabul to be locked up in a secret CIA prison known as the “Salt Pit”, where he was slammed into walls, kicked, beaten, and subjected to other forms of abuse. El-Masri was held at the Salt Pit for four months, and never charged, brought before a judge, or given access to his family or German government representatives. On May 28, 2004, he was flown to Albania on a CIA-chartered Gulfstream aircraft (...) and released without apology or explanation. On December 6, 2005, German Chancellor Angela Merkel publicly stated at a press conference– with then Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice standing by her side that – the United States had accepted that it had made a mistake in El-Masri’s case; but senior U.S. officials travelling with Rice disagreed with Merkel’s interpretation. (...) On December 13, 2012, the European Court of Human Rights held that Macedonia had violated El-Masri’s rights under the European Convention on Human Rights, and found that his ill-treatment by the CIA at Skopje Airport amounted to torture.”⁶

Martha shared a link, on Facebook: The media did cover attacks on (insert country here). You just weren’t reading it. - *Re Magazine*.

Gertrude Stein did not need to create a fictional character to write her autobiography *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*. Like most of us, she had chosen a third-person perspective. She wrote her autobiography through the eyes of her lover Alice B. Toklas: “About six weeks ago Gertrude Stein said, it does not look to me as if you were ever going to write that autobiography. You know what I am going to do. I am going to write it for you. I am going to write it as simply as Defoe did the autobiography of Robinson Crusoe. And she has and this is it.” And thinking in reverse, the autobiography of Daniel Defoe written by Robinson Crusoe might not be more interesting than the one Defoe penned about him, but I bet I’d prefer the autobiography of Defoe written by the cannibals he encountered.

Most of the poetic writings of Gertrude Stein would have difficulty passing the Turing test – sentences she uses might appear to an independent jury to be machine-programmed rather than human-written. Nowadays when we write online we often have to prove that we are not robots by typing some robot-generated passwords. Aren’t we more robots in this way than the robots themselves? And our bios – aren’t they already being curated by algorithms, by “a superimposition, on a single map, of Facebook, Google Maps, and an Outlook calendar”?

1 Gregoiré Chamayou *Drone theory*, Penguin, pp. 46-47.

2 *Ibid.*, p. 48.

3 *Ibid.*, p. 49.

4 More about this: <http://conversations.e-flux.com/t/superconversations-day-10-bassam-el-baroni-responds-to-ahmet-ogut-things-based-on-real-life-events/1702>

5 <http://www.spikeartmagazine.com/en/articles/fictional-artist>

6 *Globalizing Torture: CIA Secret Detention and Extraordinary Rendition*. Open Society Foundations, New York. 2013, p. 48.