

Jasmine Guffond in conversation with DJ Soeur Veillance aka Gloria González Fuster, a Research Professor and Co-Director of the Law, Science, Technology and Society Research Group at Vrije Universiteit Brussel, investigating data laws and policies, and most notably data protection.

JG: This title is something of a misnomer. I mean for me the whole point is that surveillance makes no sound, and therefore I'm giving it a sound so that we can hear some of these data collection processes that are usually obscured and operating in the background.

DJ SV: And there is always a problem with the word surveillance, that some people have a narrow vision of what it is, they just think it's CCTV cameras. Maybe it's better to mention 'digital' or 'data', something that relates to digital technology and the internet.

M.I.A. "The Message" (2010)

JG: I've been wondering generally how you've come across so many privacy themed songs?

DJ SV: For some, I listen to music and hear these references to privacy. For this one, I think it's commonly agreed that it's about surveillance. Some people said 'ahh, M.I.A. was explaining Snowden before Snowden.

JG: When did this track come out then?

DJ SV: Its from 2010.

JG: Right and the Snowden leaks were three years later. I think it's brilliant because it's a song that you learn at school, "the thigh bone is connected to the hip bone", and so native English speakers probably know it already. There is something creepy about using a children's song and then transforming the lyrics to say our bodies are connected to the Internet, Google, the government.

DJ SV: I didn't know about that children's song, but it still sounded creepy and scary. And it's nice because it's a really short song.

JG: Yeah it's short and to the point, very succinct.

Jasmine Guffond "Sonic Voyeur" (2019)

JG: This is from a sound installation where I was sonifying Twitter meta-data. For that project I had to pick personalities that had large followings, just so I could have regular data flows. It was interesting which personalities take up a lot of space in the Twittersphere. Donald Trump's profile is so active that I could have made a sound installation just on him.

DJ SV: It doesn't sound like Trump. It sounds relatively calm.

JG: This was recorded in February 2019, but because I installed the work a few times sometimes the Trump Twitter feed would go totally crazy and then you'd check the tweet and he would just have announced something to do with the Iranian nuclear deal, which gave it an ominous undertone. Basically, what you hear is every time followers are replying or retweeting to each profile. And it's not just Trump but also Justin Bieber, Lady Gaga, Rhianna, CNN, the BBC, and Narendra Modi.

DJ SV: So, this is about digital activity, sonification of data, but maybe not specifically surveillance as such?

JG: The first time I installed it was in the context of a group show called 'The Watched'. Most of the artists were more or less engaging with surveillance, like you said, as literally being watched, people following them, taking photos and videoing them or looking through peep holes. That's when I decided to do this work about how much we watch each other via social media platforms and also, how much information can be ascertained through meta-data. I was also thinking about what it means to have ourselves as humans translated into streams of data. Which is probably something you have thought about a lot?

DJ SV: Yes, I have been asking for my own data from Amazon, Facebook, Twitter and others and when you receive some data, the feeling is very strange. Even though it's your own data, you don't recognise yourself in it. Which is normal because the data is something that the company has made up, so it's not really just your data. Or in this case, it's not even really Trump's data but data from his followers. It's a different kind of thing, it's difficult to translate.

JG: So, it's a question of identity in a way. If we represent ourselves more and more online and it gets abstracted into data, what does it mean for us as humans if we can't relate to these digital profiles? And of course the implications of who is producing these digital profiles on us. I was also interested in how we participate in surveillance by actively giving up our data in exchange for exposure or social status.

DJ SV: There is something that I keep remembering about the lecture that you gave in Brussels. This dilemma that you had about making sounds that are nice to listen to, or sounds that are scary. And how in a way surveillance is scary and unpleasant, but it's also fascinating to participate in it, sometimes.

JG: Its difficult with aesthetics because what's a beautiful sound for one person might be an ugly sound for another. So it's hard to control a message through the aesthetics of sound but I'm trying to reflect the complexity of it. Like you were saying, obviously I'm critical of surveillance but at the same time the experience of it is fun, it's going shopping, it's sharing photos, its chatting with friends, it's promoting yourself, its updating your website.

Cardi B "Through Your Phone" (2018)

DJ SV: This song, is actually about defending this invasion of privacy. It was funny that the whole record was called *Invasion of Privacy*, I thought she was going to criticise people invading her privacy but not at all, we have the opposite. It's also about social media, taking someone's phone and realising how we put everything on our phones and then share it.

JG: I find it interesting because it expresses a very personal relationship to privacy where as statements like ‘Nothing to Hide’ assume there is a general relationship to privacy, that everyone has the same relationship to privacy, whereas in fact it is extremely personal and cultural. She is actively invading her boyfriend’s privacy because she doesn’t trust him. So it also brings up issues of trust that are inherent to privacy.

DJ SV: My background is not in sociology. I tend to work with privacy and data protection as a lawyer, which is why it’s so interesting for me to listen to these pop songs, they remind me that privacy is so complex and can be many things for many people but then we simplify things by saying privacy is, for instance, about controlling one’s information. There are many dimensions and relations to privacy.

Kari Faux “Leave Me Alone” (2019)

DJ SV: This one relates to a positive defence of privacy, this ‘me time’, ‘me space’. Asserting your privacy as a space that you need to yourself. There are a few songs about this with a more feminist perspective that are quite interesting. Privacy as a need for space.

JG: It again expresses how everyone has a strong sense of personal privacy in the context of the ‘nothing to hide’ slogan that gets used. A few of the tracks I listened to from your lists position privacy in relation to some creepy ex-boyfriend stalking them.

DJ SV: Yes, there are many songs about stalkers, perhaps this is an easy trope to write a song about. Or maybe many people have a tendency to stalk.

JG: And that is so much easier to do with smartphones and social media.

DJ SV: Yes. I think probably many of us are in a way stalkers online.

JG: Are you guilty of stalking people online?

DJ SV: What is it to stalk online? My mother stalks me, somehow. I’m sure we all get information about people without telling them. I don’t think anybody is fully innocent of surveilling others online.

JG: The end of the music video is what I particularly like. She is so exacerbated by her ex calling her all the time that she begins to smash phones with a baseball bat. The very last shot is a close up of a phone that although it's been clearly smashed, the screen is cracked, it starts to ring. Even though she tried to smash the phone with a baseball bat it wasn't enough to defend her privacy. Its a good image for how pervasive these technologies can be.

Sam Kidel “Live at Google Data Center” (2018, edit)

JG: Kidel simulated the acoustics of the Google Data Centre in Iowa to make it sound as if he has broken in to stage a free party there. And it is interesting to note that these data centres are maximum security locations, that the only way that one could break is by simulating the acoustic space.

DJ SV: It's an original take on the sonification, not of data, but of the realities of data, these servers that we don't get to see. Recently there is a lot of interesting information about the environmental repercussions of these server centres and A.I. Perhaps if we saw all these servers and the impact they can have on the environment and we understood all these flows of data we would also have a different perception of these technologies. But everything is invisible and out of sight.

JG: Yes, the infrastructure is very much hidden.

DJ SV: Yes, and this is an interesting way of trying to represent it.

Jenna Sutela “Nimiia Vibie I” (2019, edit)

DJ SV: I'm not sure this song is particularly critical but I think the fact it is about machine learning is interesting, as we are now trying to apply machine learning to everything, in some cases just to see what happens. And the alien part, at least its not about human robot comparisons. With Artificial Intelligence (A.I.) we are always trying to define the machine in relation to the human, we compare them, for example this machine thinks like a human or even better than a human. Here at least its something different, that we are

not trying to define the capability of the machine in comparison to the human. That's interesting as an artistic approach.

JG: It's interesting how you said that it doesn't seem critical of A.I. The project did come out of a Google arts and culture residency program so that's maybe why it's less critical, because of the context.

DJ SV: It's safer to have a commentary on A.I. and aliens than to explore the impact of A.I. on society. But it's still interesting to listen to this and think about how technology allows you to create this imaginary language.

JG: And you can always relate machine learning back to digital surveillance. We all know that data is collected from us so that we can be fed targeted advertisements but it's also being used to train A.I. or machine learning because the bigger the data set the better the A.I.

Een Glish "Log In" (2019)

JG: So explain to me, who is Een Glish?

DJ SV: We don't know, we just know there is some connection with somebody previously known as the Google Translate Lady. Presumably a fake persona, an artist using this.

JG: So before this entity was called Een Glish, it was called Google Translate Lady? And then Google complained, was it a copyright issue?

DJ SV: Well, that's my interpretation, that they had to change the name. In any case, many of the lyrics are a reflection of technology and software and there are collaborations with other imaginary, non-human artists.

JG: It seems from the lyrics that there is a whole family, the Google Translate Lady, Google analytics and her sister Google Maps.

DJ SV: There are also collaborations with Microsoft David, or Hatsune Miku. It's another artistic device around the digital, you can sonify data, but also create artistic projects with software personalities. What is a real artist, what is a real artistic project?

Teejayx6 "Under Pressure" (2019)

DJ SV: Here the whole thing is about scam, identity theft and online fraud. He was kicked out of the internet 'by the government' I think because of online fraud, but it's not clear.

JG: What is interesting about about this one is that he downloaded the Tor browser to get back onto the dark web to do something illegal, which is exactly the cultural baggage that the Tor browser doesn't need or want. It is sometimes positioned against the Tor browser, that people use it to conduct illegal activities on the dark web but in fact it's the only browser that we have that is by default private. Which is a great and very important tool.

DJ SV: There is also something really paradoxical with talking about tools for anonymity and at the same time showing off that you are anonymous on the internet doing all these illegal things.

JG: Yeah, if I was doing anything illegal on the dark web I wouldn't sing about it and publish the song. But this is what we were talking about before, where the artist has a public profile.

DJ SV: Yes, as an artist, but also as an academic, it is easy to feel trapped by surveillance because you want to be, if not famous, at least exposed and visible.

Killer DBA "Data Protection" (2017)

JG: So Killer DBA worked in I.T. for twenty years then starting writing songs to help him remember information crucial to his job. I had to look up what DBA stands for - database analyst. Its a great concept, I wonder if he is open to suggestions. I think if he was singing about how to install the Tor browser or use PGP for encrypted emailing it would be a nice way for people to easily access these tools.

DJ SV: Maybe he does some training with live shows. For me it's really the perfect Prince song about data protection.

JPEG Mafia x FREAKY "Big Data + The Internet Ain't Safe" (2018)

DJ SV: This song has two parts, and the first one is about Big Data. I actually like to play this song to my colleagues. Nowadays we are always discussing Artificial Intelligence, but a couple of years ago everybody was talking about Big Data. This song expresses very well the attitude of everybody selling Big Data then, and now Artificial Intelligence: they have it, it's Big, and it's the solution to everything. You can't counter argue. The second part is about internet safety, data protection, and security, in a more subtle way. The record was very much concerned with Trump, at the time that Trump was about to be elected.

JG: So, is it relating to the Cambridge Analytica scandal?

DJ SV: Not directly, but it's from that period, and I think if there is a critique of power and politics in the United States, it's logical to include data issues.

JG: And your colleagues, now let me get this right, are academics that are working in a law department at a university on European data privacy?

DJ SV: Yes, we are in Brussels, where there are a lot of decision makers of European Union institutions, and therefore a lot of lobbying from all the big companies. So, we are embedded in this kind of lobbying discourse by companies and industry. Now with artificial intelligence there is a lot of pressure to to embrace it to solve all the problems of humanity and it is necessary to keep a critical mind.

JG: Yes definitely, that is an issue for me, I mean I think we need to question giving over agency to technology, not that I'm anti-technology but you have to ask who owns it and how is it being used.

DJ SV: A lot of people are happy to give over agency to technology and then you have the challenge of how to find the right arguments and the right reasoning to counter the power of these lobby groups.

JG: Yes, and what would be your argument against blindly handing over agency to algorithmic decision making for example?

DJ SV: Personally, my fight is that I believe in individual rights, in digital rights, and I think there is a need to recognise these digital rights. Now by claiming this I end up having to argue with many people who are saying, like you were saying, that privacy or data protection rights are not the only, or the best answer. People complain that they are not effective arguments, that they are too individualistic and that we need more global, social justice because surveillance is much more than just an infringement of your privacy. I agree that surveillance it's about much more but, still, we still need to fight for individual rights, if we want social justice, environmental justice, or any justice. I still believe in these individual privacy rights and now people tend to give them up too easily dismissing them as 'individualistic'. When I fight for my individual rights to access my personal data to know what these big companies know about me personally, this is not at all about being 'individualistic'. From a legal perspective, this all makes perfect sense as a way of advancing everybody's digital rights, just like when Max Schrems, an Austrian activist asked for his data from Facebook and discovered that Facebook was not complying with many things and started a big fight with Facebook which has been good for many people. It's just like civil rights, to have collective progress you need individuals asserting their own 'individualistic' rights, like your right to sit on the seat of the bus of your choice.

Jasmine Guffond "Five Faces" (from the installation *Sonic Portraits*, 2014)

DJ SV: Why did you start working with Facial Recognition Technology (FRT) already a few years ago?

JG: It started when I was doing my sound studies masters at UdK and we did a project with the Deutsche Oper, it was a sound walk. The director chose the theme of protest, because there is a history of protest around the Deutsche Oper building in Charlottenburg and apparently Berlin audiences are more prone to booing so there is a kind of protest

within the audience. At the time I had been reading about how after the occupy movement in New York, CCTV cameras with Facial Recognition technology were being installed, which was calling into question one's right to be anonymous at protests. I thought it would be interesting to look at a contemporary technological aspect of protest culture. I discovered that all protests in Germany are videoed by the police and they have the capability to cross match the videos with databases of I.D's or drivers licenses using FRT. Also it's forbidden in Germany to cover your face at a protest. And FRT is particularly insidious because unlike an iris scan or finger print for which you have to actively hand over your finger you don't have to actively do anything for FRT to identify you. You are passively identified so it's considered to be a silent technology. I thought it was important to give it a sound.

DJ SV: It fits well to the playlist because of this connection between protest and freedom of expression and surveillance. Technologies like facial recognition are not 'just invading privacy' understood as a personal space. They have a visible impact on the ways that people can protest, express themselves, mobilise. The political dimension of surveillance is very clear.

JG: And in the meantime it's become so prevalent.

Mat Dryhurst "Surveilling the Audience @ Southbank (2014)

JG: So this is Mat Dryhurst surveilling the audience at London's Southbank. From what I understand it's a recording of a live performance where he scraped data from the facebook profiles of attendees. It's a patch he built that was also used on Holly Herndon's record *Platform*.

DJ SV: This is interesting as another example of art on surveillance. Something I have seen quite a lot when people make art about surveillance is that they decide to surveil the audience. But he has done it in a nice way, because it's not just about showing you your picture.

JG: Yes, he's abstracted their personal information.

DJ SV: Yes, it gives you this strange feeling that we were discussing before, that you receive your data but in a very strange way. It's interesting to see this translation: you are being abstracted, your own data sounds very strange.

JG: I've also, like you, requested my data from Facebook. It was data related to advertising, so I received a list of words. Some of the items on the list I couldn't relate to at all and other ones made sense. They are building weird profiles on us, but it would be even creepier if it was an exact mirror of myself.

Jasmine Guffond "Dotcompound" (2020, edit)

JG: So, we just have one track left, which you chose from my album.

DJ SV: Oh yes. I have to confess I don't know which project this one was about, but I really like how the album has four parts. What was the logic?

JG: Well it's an album that was developed over a couple of years. So quite slowly and meanwhile I've been researching for my PhD that's focused on online surveillance and sound as a method of investigation. Basically, the titles of the tracks came from this research and the sounds coming from different art projects. Like the installation that sonifies Twitter meta-data, some of the sounds from that project are used in one of the compositions. It's like the research is one activity and the music is another and they have come together on the album.

DJ SV: When you composed this track, was it related to a specific project, or did you focus more on the music?

JG: The origins of this track are sounds that I created for a composition for a dance performance about what a future dead forest might sound like but the title, *Dotcompound* is a play on the word dotcom. Dotcompound suggests that the Internet is a prison like environment, in contrast to our experience of it. I mean we are constantly surveilled online which is like being in a maximum security prison, but it doesn't feel like being in prison. There is a paradox or disconnect between our experience of browsing online and the actuality of the incessant collection of our personal data.

DJ SV: So, there is a dark element, but it's only a part of it?

JG: Yes. I think the more you are aware of how our every single move is being surveilled – it's dark, the way our information streams are curated by major tech corporations is dark, but our experience of being surveilled is actually fun and playful. I've recently come to appreciate online surveillance as a mundane power, it's deeply embedded in our everyday technological mediation through (though not only) networked infrastructures. From that perspective it's a dangerous power as it's easy to legitimise and normalise, you know, the web is a convenient communication tool and for now I can't imagine living without online connectivity.