Interview with Donna Szoke, October 2019

VB:
Invisible Histories **makes visible and draws our attention to the fact that 270,000 radioactive mice are contained in a nuclear waste facility near Niagara Falls, NY. How did you discover this history and how was it then developed into an artwork that has taken on the form of both a video installation and smartphone/tablet app?**

DS:
In 2011, I was invited to a collaborative design charrette at University of Buffalo integrating my undergraduate visual arts students with theatre design students from the University of Buffalo. Thematically, the collaboration sessions dealt with our mutual terrain of Niagara Falls and our work was to research, explore, and respond in design. During the research phase I was introduced to the Ginger Strand book "Inventing Niagara" where she briefly mentioned the Niagara Falls Storage Site. Having recently arrived in southern Ontario from Vancouver, I was trying to orient myself to the new landscape, this was a shocking discovery. As I enquired with people in my daily life, I was equally shocked that people on the Canadian side of the border were unaware of something so terrifying and nearby.

Here's more from my recent paper "*Invisible Animals"* published in ISEA 2019:
"*Invisible Histories* began when I came across the astonishing fact that 270,000 radioactive mice are buried near Lewiston, NY, as a result of atomic weapon research … At the Niagara Falls Storage Site, 32 kilometers from Brock University where I teach, the irradiated remains 270,000 mice are interred in lead and concrete, accompanied by scores of other irradiated animals including cats, dogs, and monkeys. Most local Canadians are oblivious to the proximity of the Niagara Falls Storage Site.

In 2015 I turned *Invisible Histories* into a smart phone app. The app uses the print, as its icon, and multiple iterations of the 3D animation. The app is geo-locative so as the user gets closer to the epicenter of the NFSS, more and more glowing animated mice flood the phone. This work exists as a type of anti-monument that engages in the missing spectacle in the Niagara Falls landscape—a landscape of otherwise extravagant sites. New media becomes an avenue for marking, memorializing and re-activating history. As activist art, it nods to critical animal studies, and questions the ways in which we engage, abuse, and memorialize nonhuman animals. It invites the viewer to visualize historical outcomes, and hopefully by extension, to imagine other presents, and other futures."

Once I had found out about the 270,000 mice in the NFSS I just was haunted, imagining the mice. I'd been teaching 3D animation and it made sense to create a 3D animated mouse. It had to glow green, as that is how it works in my ridiculously comic imagination. I also had a brilliant animation student, Yuyu Ouyang, and it was a great opportunity to work with Yuyu. Once we created the mouse, we exported a simple video of the mouse running back and forth. I had been invited to install work at a gallery in downtown Buffalo as an outcome of the design Charente. I used a small Qumi projector and installed the mouse rear projected under the lip of a piece of furniture, so the mouse appeared to be running on the floor at approximately almost mouse size.

After the installation was complete, I kept thinking about how to represent the mass of mice. I realized we basically had the assets we needed for a phone app, I just required a programmer to make it so the app functioned in a geo-locative manner. Networking through friends, I found Ira Fich. Ira was brilliant in creating the app for both iPhone and Android. Android was the most challenging as we had to deliver the animation in very small packets to make it backwards compatible with older Android mobile tech. I love that!!

Once the app was published, I gave it a shout out on Twitter and managed to meet US Niagara area activists that are very well organized and vigilant around the NFSS. I also met and became friends with a professor of nuclear culture, Lindsey Freeman, who is now at SFU.

In the course of this research, I compiled a google map, and a spreadsheet of all known nuclear waste. There are some holes in my data, as Russia and Australia don't report to the same centralizing nuclear data organizations.

VB:

What has been the response to *Invisible Historie*s from activist communities?

DS:

It has been mixed, depending on the activist community. Some have fully embraced it. Some activists thought initially that I was more concerned with the hard data, the 'evidence' of nuclear waste, etc. For me the app is activist in the ability of an artwork to fully flesh an idea in an emotional, visceral, physical, affective experience, to truly animate an experience for a viewer (or user). It takes otherwise abstract data

and gives it material form. Others find the absurdity of it off-putting, as if activism is 'serious' work and can't be funny. The app isn't utilitarian in a direct way, and it gives a send up to rational utilitarianism.

VB:

It is difficult to picture what a few hundred thousand animals would actually look like (alive or dead). How did the use of digital technologies allow for a negotiation of the abstractness of the scale of animals, the site itself, and the history of the NFSS? Essentially, how do digital technologies allow you to negotiate the real, physical reality?

DS:

It is extremely difficult to imagine 270,000 mice. It is also very difficult to imagine the toxic radiation of nuclear waste, so in this way, the double blindness is a beautiful pairing. To some extent, the anxiety produced by the app, through the idea that the mice are pointing you *towards* nearby nuclear waste is actually physically distressing, and I think the absolute embodiment through fear is a very 'productive' aspect of the app. It also violates all the neat, clean consumer culture ideas of what app's are 'supposed to do' and it questions "what is *utilitarian*?" Why would we want to go *towards* the NFSS? It is a mad idea, as any reasonable response is to run away from nuclear waste. I think if an app brings or provokes ideas of social justice, of environmentalism, of anti-nuclear activism, then it has done a spectacularly good job of helping to shape a citizen. Like the mice worker bodies of nuclear research, we are so much more than our 'productivity.'

VB:

Last year I was on campus and kept smelling wafts of rodent cage scents, only to later discover that I had been sitting by the vents of biomedical labs that house hundreds of test mice and rats. Globally 50-100 million vertebrate animals are used annually in experiments, and yet they remain invisible to the public. What is also out of sight are the networks in place to facilitate breeding, storage, shipping, and disposal. Can you discuss how *Invisible Histories* negotiates the human-animal encounters within the systems of animal testing?

DS

What a horrible, visceral experience! Power and invisibility are intertwined intimately in contemporary life. I think of Trevor Paglen, Hasan Elahi, and "artveillance" works [https://theintercept.com/2014/11/13/art-surveillance-explored-artists/] I made a previous work that is

comically absurd in creating visual evidence of surveillance called *and all watched over by machines of loving grace*. http://donnaszoke.com/?projects=all-watched-over

I've been haunted by the image of one mouse for a few decades, and I suspect this is one of the 'inspirations' for making the app. I was happily beginning to make a collage, and as I flipped open a magazine (was it Scientific American? I think so) I saw an ad for OncoMouseTM. It was guaranteed to produce cancer within a specified time frame. The image and concept arrested me immediately, and I don't think I've made a collage since that day. The ad showed a specific mouse, in great detail. I remember looking at its face and wondering what I would do if I found out I was similarly bred to produce my own death. Of course, I am, but in an abstract, non-utilitarian way. The entire OncoMouseTM premise is so completely bizarre to me. Years later, my studio mate told me she had heard that mice don't 'talk' to each other: they 'sing.' This combination of factoids creates mice as having these grand, operatic tragic lives in my imagination. And despite their tiny size, I involuntarily scream when I see a mouse. Once, my sister screamed at a mouse so loud, it dropped dead. As a professor of art practice, I've shown this work at a research fair beside professors that use animals testing and it is an AWKWARD situation! Paradoxically, I want to free all the mice, but I don't want them near me.

Also, from the ISEA 2019 essay:
"Many of the world's spiritual traditions posit that what we see of the world rests on an unseen and meaningful order. Besides the invisible as the realm of the mystical, the invisible is also the realm of power in contemporary life. The degree to which one is able to make one's self and actions visible or invisible is in direct correlation to one's power. The most important global events are relatively invisible and difficult to capture into images. The current scale of animal atrocities is difficult to envision as a whole but can be intimated through individual instances."

More from the same essay:
"Throughout creating this project I kept thinking about how the irradiated mice of nuclear weapons research occupy multiple invisibilities in a Marxist sense: the mice are the dispossessed material outcomes that are containers of their own alienated labour; as alienated workers, the mice continue to work through their radioactive remains that outlast the bomb product they helped create; the mice are unwitting consumers of nuclear war, consuming their own alienated labour through their own alienated worker-body remains. How does the material waste of animal bodies haunt consumer objects? If we think of George Bataille's reading of Marx, the mice are an unproductive expenditure. [10] The narratives of utility, guided by instrumental rationalism, produce these by-products or unproductive expenditures such

as war, pollution, and these irradiated mice. In Sontag's reading of Bataille, there are no purely unproductive expenditures. [11] These mice are productive-non-productive expenditures, as they petition our empathy. Therefore, the mobile app's true utility is that it gives us the opportunity to respond to these mice with a community of mourning, a politics of care, that has real lived outcomes. This is an ethics of the virtual. If we critically engage with mobile app functionality, we can create opportunities to newly perceive and enact an aesthetics of care."

[10] Bataille, George. The Accursed Share: An Essay on General Economy. (New York: Zone Books, 1988), 4.

[11] Sontag, Susan. Regarding the Pain of Others. (New York: Picador, 2003), 22.

VB:

There is a long history of animals used in warfare or for the general "greater good of humanity," animals made into weapons or trained as working animals, such as bomb-detecting dogs. But smaller creatures remain largely unrepresented in this history of animal use. Lytle S. Adams, creator of the experimental "bat bombs" during WWII stated they were "the lowest form of animal life." Can you discuss the animal as subject/laborer in *Invisible Histories* and your other works in this context?

DS:

Also, from the ISEA 2019 essay:

"The atrocities enacted upon animals in the course of warfare are often elided in war histories. I think of Franz Marc and his visionary paintings of horses created on the eve of, and during, World War I. Initially his horse paintings suggest bucolic spaces and idealized forms, such as in *The Large Blue Horses* from 1911. [12] Conversely, Marc's painting *Tierschicksale* (*Animal Destinies* or *Fate of the Animals*) was completed in 1913 when war was impending in European. [13] On the rear of the canvas, Marc wrote "Und Alles Sein ist flammend Leid" ("And all being is flaming agony"). [14] While serving in World War I, Marc wrote to his wife that he could hardly believe he had created the painting and its premonition of the destruction to come. [15] *Fighting Forms* from 1914 is perhaps my favourite of these visionary works as the animals have been abstracted into the pure forces. [16]"

[12] Marc, Franz. *The Large Blue Horses*. 1911. Oil on Canvas, 2667 x 4597 mm, Walker Art Museum, Minneapolis.
[13] Marc, Franz. *Tierschicksale (Fate of the Animals)*. 1913. Oil on Canvas, 1950 x 2680 mm, Kunstmuseum, Basel, Switzerland.
[14] Wikipedia contributors, "Franz Marc (2019)" *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia,* accessed February 21, 2018, https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Franz_Marc&oldid=874853054
[15] Wikipedia contributors, "Franz Marc," n.p.
[16] Marc, Franz. *Fighting Forms*. 1914. Oil on Canvas, 91 x 131 cm, Bavarian State Painting Collections, Munich, Germany.

I think a lot about alienated and non-alienated labour. I think it's a big influence in why as an artist I work primarily in single channel video, video installation, a free phone app, and other non-commodified forms. It gives me an opportunity to frame art experience as an arena of experience, encounter, and lived time that primarily affect the viewer visually, emotionally, mentally, conceptually. Part of what I love about video is that it is always experienced in the present moment, in a profound way. I see animal and human labours as totally equal.

I was making the Fainting Pillow as a site-specific installation and commissioned multiple for a solo exhibition at Rodman Hall. http://donnaszoke.com/?projects=faint-feint
It was really important to me that I produce the multiple with local labour. After a number of enquiries, I was directed to Nancy Thiessen (nee Kapodistrias). She is a seamstress, and I explained the project involved handmade pillows that would bear a silk-screened drawing of a fainted woman. it was a critique of the culture of fainting couches, a bizarre history that goes so far as to normalize physical gendered oppression (corsets) through furniture, rather than to rethink the repressive practice of binding women's bodies. I asked Nancy if she would also pose for the drawing of a fainted woman, so her labour would be also present through her image. She said she was thrilled to pose, and she also had a fainting disorder!! ha ha ha. I love that story. it is true.

VB:
In her book *Animal Ethos* (2019) Lesley A. Sharp points out that not all animals are regarded as such by the USDA Animal Welfare Act, for example, because mice of the genus *Mus* are bred exclusively for research purposes their management determines they are no longer animals. If not animal, what are they? I am interested in your response to the animal/non-animal designation and how art can offer a way for these creatures to be (re)considered as part of the broader narratives that they have been excluded from.

DS:

Are they organs without bodies? Bodies without organs? what is the essential quality, the UR "mousiness" that they either exceed or don't meet? This is powerful buffoonery. They are mice. The fact that they are deemed not mice is to sidestep the ethical, moral, and financial implications of using living beings in this way. This question isn't about the mice, it is about the extent and reach of the USDA in establishing the Animal Welfare Act. This is an instantiation of the Racial Capitalocene (https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/3376-racial-capitalocene) in flexing its power to declare these mice invisible as animal subjects, within the USDA act. Part of my being is enraged, while the other part is also a mouse, an anarchist mouse dressed up as a peasant in a Monty Python scene, declaring its right of self-determination. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-8bqQ-C1PSE) Despite the USDA's opinion I believe those mice are beings, that they have a privileged interiority, a sense of self, and that they sing to their neighbours, their lovers, their children.

VB:

The close proximity of the NFSS to Brock University must have made this project somewhat personal. Because the *Invisible Histories* app has a geo-locative function, the work requires viewers/users to confront the regional history and site from near or far. Can you discuss how exhibiting this work in different contexts shapes the reading of it?

DS:

Yes! The project came directly out of my completely personal response to the proximity of the NFSS. When I first heard about the proximity of the NFSS to Brock University, I nearly got on a plane back to Vancouver!! Then I realized my friends back in Vancouver were worried about the Fukushima Daiichi disaster, and pondering whether the nuclear contamination would spread across the Pacific Ocean. That cemented my determination to figure out a way to work with the mice / radioactive ghosts of the NFSS. Deciding to make the app like the Pied Piper gone wrong, in that it leads us *towards* the nuclear waste that we desperately wish to avoid, echoes my visceral terror of nearing the contaminated, toxic remains. Ira Fich, the app programmer, and I played with deciding how distant the data would fall off. We wanted it to be fully functional in other locations yet privileging the user experience as one neared the NFSS, populating the device with more and more mice as once nears its proximity. Part of me finds it funny that it privileges the Niagara Region, which is a bit ironic when it is shown in Toronto or Vancouver or Gwangju SK as we think of those cities as major art centres, not as places to point towards non centralized locations.

VB:

You mentioned that there are nuclear waste facilities like Niagara Falls Storage Site around the world, some in remote locations and others close to or in cities. How do you see *Invisible Histories* applied to other contexts and histories? I keep imagining a GPS art app for all the forgotten or hidden nuclear waste (animal and non-animal) around the world.

DS:

YES!! I am really quite haunted by the wild boars of Fukushima, and I really want to materialize them as app avatars. It has been a big challenge going for different funding opportunities to make the app international (think of all the animals!!) as these grants don't have enough arm's length for the activist and egalitarian nature of this app. As soon as I check the keyword 'nuclear' a question pops up as to how I am promoting the nuclear energy industry in Canada. It's tempting to respond "By making fun of it?" but I'm afraid the jurors aren't quiet Monty Pythonesque enough for me. And there we have circling back to an earlier question: the idea of utilitarianism and art. I am still pointing at these aspects of being (ours, mice's) that exceed, or really, preclude the urgencies of the Racial Capitalocene.

VB:

Can you expand on *Invisible Histories* as an "anti-monument"? I keep thinking about monuments to animals that openly celebrate them as both utilitarian material and worker, and what comes to mind is the *Monument to Laboratory Rats and Mice* (2013) at the Institute of Cytology and Genetics in Russia by artist Andrew Kharkevich. The work features an anthropomorphic elderly mouse dressed as a scientist (glasses and smock) knitting a strand of DNA. The cuteness of the mouse disguises (or celebrates?) the reality of test animals as disposable material and laborers, but at the same time, I cannot think of an equivalent public monument.

DS:

My early art practice included much sculpture, and I've thought a lot about monuments, the monumentalizing impulse, and how to intervene in those 'heroic' aesthetics. In an early work Ja*mes*, I cast a very slim man's torso in life-size bronze, as at first glance the torso could be a stand in for the cliched wasted AIDS body, yet the model was in fact, worn thin by caring for a sick friend. Once, I was walking at night along the Danube in Budapest (Pest, to be precise) and I tripped on a low relief sculpture, catching myself before falling into the Danube. The sculpture is of bronze empty shoes, a monument to the Jewish people shot on the spot by the Arrow Cross during WW2, by Can Togay and Gyula Pauer (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shoes_on_the_Danube_Bank). Though the tripping aspect of the work is probably unintentional, it was such a key aspect of my experience, I was thinking about how art works

can give us both intimacy and distanciation in the monumental experience, as for instance, in many works by Christian Boltanski, or as in *Monument Against Fascism* by Jochen Gertz and Ester Shalev-Gertz, which in fact, disappears (https://vimeo.com/217650363).