

SEAN RASPET: "Reformulations"

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For Sean Raspet's exhibition entitled *Untitled (Registration/PIN: G0009296/78GY76DM; G0009297/99ER43TB; G0009298/39ZL54SJ)* at New Galerie, New York, the artist coated every surface of the gallery with synthetic DNA suspended in a gel, marketed commercially as SelectaDNA. When it comes in contact with another surface, the product leaves behind a residue containing an unique synthetic DNA sequence that can be traced back to the place of first contact. The product is advertised as a security device, which can be smeared on property or sprayed on a person at the moment of an intrusion, in order to trace suspects or valuables. SelectaDNA allows our skin, clothing, or belongings to become tracking devices, pinpointable to a specific time and place, a feature that has alarming implications for privacy and the law. The existence of such a product points towards the urgency of a politics occupied with appearance and disappearance, legibility and illegibility— a politics principle to our time. By bringing the product out of the lab (or the bank vault) into the realm of exhibition, Raspet puts SelectaDNA and its associated risks on display, rerouting them. The work speaks to Raspet's larger interest in intervening and mimicking the way that an operational language, such as code, chemical, or law, functions as both procedure and material. By inserting what he terms as an "access point, switch or keycode" into an established process, he can mutate its larger composition. This strategy not only disrupts an existent function, it produces new deformations.

Past works by Raspet sought to interrogate at the level of the database. For example, his series *Untitled (Police*

Incident) (2010-2011) recombined snapshots of a police arrest in an ever-growing image bank, which were presented as a multi-layered array of hanging printed banners. With each exhibition, the artist folded in installation shots of previous exhibitions of the same piece alongside these photos, building upon the supply of printed images. After multiple iterations of the project, enduring elements of the original or what the artist termed "stable typologies" would emerge, reflecting a progressive, self-organized uniformity that appears if one adds to and pulls from the same pool of information. While *Untitled (Police Incident)* created a database, other projects by Raspet intervene in already existing bodies of information. Recently, Raspet has been registering non-yet existent compounds into the Chemical Abstract System, which catalogs chemical compounds for the scientific community. Each entry is marked by a CAS number, and acts as a fictive possibility in an otherwise regulated and utilitarian body of information. His other work *A Composition of Matter Consisting of the Difference Between Two Compositions of Matter* (2014) establishes a patent for new elements that combine the measurable differences between the composition of Pepsi and Coke. Co-opting the commercialized mechanisms of law and science, the piece fulfills all the necessary requirements for it to remain in those systems, while simultaneously calling out its own alterity by existing outside the bounds of commercial application (and with it, value). Raspet produces new entities by mobilizing the language of regulation to occupy present systems or create new ones, demonstrating how such forms could become generative.

Raspet's recent projects engage with what Philip Agre termed "grammars of action" in his 1994 text on the evolution of information technology's effective "capture" of human behavior, "Surveillance and Capture: Two Models of Privacy." Agre's notion of "capture" illustrates the unique way computers "read" and in turn, regulate, human subjects, and he marks it as a core feature of computer technology. Under the capture model, human activity is reorganized through grammars of action in order to improve their legibility for computers, allowing the computer to improve their tracking of that behavior through normative force. A computer can only compute what it captures, and grammars of action increase the computer's ability to track and function through analyzing and articulating human behavior into parseable units, while also imposing and instrumentatizing implicit and explicit adjustments that modify behavior towards increased legibility. In the twenty years since Agre's text, our entire world has been recalibrated toward the maximum efficiency of capture: SelectaDNA exists alongside the eye scan,

the thumbprint, face recognition software, browser cookies and GPS tracking devices. These grammars of action are so thoroughly interwoven into human behavior and culture, that it is unfeasible to maintain a position outside their influence. As such, the operational languages Raspet wields work *from within* as a mechanism that infiltrates, initiating distorted forms and functionality.

As our own legibility increases, the grammars of action themselves remain indiscernible to human perception. Fitting, then, that the presentation of SelectaDNA on the walls and surfaces at New Galerie, New York would be invisible to the viewer. It follows the many obscured transactions unseen by the human eye, forces that implicitly and explicitly steer us while remaining invisible. Raspet states that he was drawn to the idea of a viewer "marked and marking" in the project, where their personal surfaces become an extension of those in the gallery. The installation is a demonstration of our own legibility, our appearance from the vantage point of a roaming pandemonic eye, a term theorist Branden Hookway described as a "new techno-economic regime...imagined as an ever-alert eye constantly scanning the environment for information that may be valorized, producing market environments wherever they emerge and at the very moment of their apprehension."^[1] It posits an important question, namely how does one reveal grammars of action? What tactics are capable of approaching something so infinitely complex and abstract? Raspet has begun to think of his work as a reformulation—taking a formula and changing its variables to impact the overall structure. This implies movement, flux, and changeability. The "access point, switch or keycode" introduces mutation, acting as a form of adaptable re-engineering. Thus, Raspet is not *revealing* grammars of action, if we consider "revealing" as a framework for thinking about a human-centered approach to visibility, a dichotomy of invisible/visible. Rather, he's modifying its intrinsic operational language to generate deviant forms and (re)synthesized compounds.

If all surfaces become machine readable, and capture occurs all the way down from the macro to the micro, then hacking at the level of reproduction allows an interception to the veritable (and material) productive process. Operational languages, as code, chemical formulas, or the law, have the power to enact, to enforce, to bring into existence. Raspet adopts these languages to test their output, to think and inhabit their logic towards a differing end result. Surfaces become, once again, programmed, produced, processed.