

Jon Lackman

RANDOM DARKNET SHOPPER

"I shop therefore I am"

–Barbara Kruger, 1987

In September of 2014, the Swiss artists Carmen Weisskopf and Domagoj Smoljo, known as */!Mediengruppe Bitnik /or just /Bitnik/*, created a piece of software called a bot, capable of operating nearly autonomously, which they named */Random Darknet Shopper/* or */RDS/*. When turned on, RDS each week blindly selects an item costing less than \$100 from an online black market, pays from its own Bitcoin account, and has the item shipped to the gallery or museum in which it currently resides.

Because it is so autonomous, because its taste in illicit goods is so quirky, or because of a fault in my own programming, I can't help but personify the bot. For me Random Darknet Shopper is not an */it /but a /he./*//Why not a */she/*? I'm not sure. Only a sexist would assume an obsessive shopper is a she, right? Plus: men quail in stores, they choose stuff at random just to be done. One of many strange reflections that RDS has imposed on me recently.

24 September 2014

Bitnik installs RDS on a laptop in the nonprofit gallery Kunst Halle St. Gallen in St. Gallen, Switzerland, a Swiss university town with deep religious roots. His first act on Earth is to get online and connect to the world's biggest illegal emporium: */Agora Shop/*. As if playing

pin-the-tail-on-the donkey, he closes his eyes, chooses a department—«Services > Other»—points to »Fire brigade masterkeys set,« clicks */buy/*, and messages his shipping address directly to the seller. All by himself.

Such keys are »useful for the tool box for unlocking and gaining access to communal gates and storage areas,« says the UK-based vendor, RastalnPeace. In the picture, the six metal hunks look brand-new. Who put them in the hands of an Agora seller? A locksmith behind on boat payments? The widow of a Rastafarian firefighter?



1 October 2014

RDS is ready for his second buy. He clicks the »Tobacco > Smoked« department and buys a \$40 carton of Chesterfield Blue cigarettes stamped »Fumatul ucide,« from a Ukrainian named */Only/*. Only is an Agora Shop

veteran with over seventy sales. What kind of people buy legal goods from a black market? I bet they can afford cigarette taxes if they have a computer and a credit card and are tech-savvy enough to shop on Agora. But then, the feds would have their address, phone and credit card number, eh? Black markets aren't just for criminals anymore. »Fumatul ucide« is Romanian for »Smoking kills.«



8 October 2014

Purchase #3: Counterfeits > Accessories > \$95 Fake Louis Vuitton Trevi PM Handbag. Yenning a banal status symbol, RDS? (You could have at least chosen the Murakami version.) I ask Smoljo: are you sometimes disappointed by RDS' taste? »Always,« he says. »I'm always happy and I'm always disappointed.« Lucky for Bitnik, the seller is out of stock and refunds RDS' money.

9 October 2014

The first package arrives! A small padded envelope with a Royal Mail sticker. Gallery staff gleefully mount the keys, envelope and packaging in a grey shadowbox with a printed transcript of the bot's »thought process« tacked to the box's back. The keys hang gleaming like a portal to another world.

14 October 2014

Purchase #4: Information > eBooks > The Lord of the Rings collection. Just \$0.99! It'll cost more for the gallery print it out for display. If only your parents had enabled you to read it, RDS. Perhaps you'd imagine your key ring to be a Ring of Power.

Keys, cigarettes, a handbag, an eBook. Congratulations, bot, you've clearly chosen randomly. But why do you wander the market blind as Oedipus? To sample the state of the black markets, as a pollster would voters? Or do you think that forgoing pre-meditation exempts you from legal responsibility for whatever arrives in the mail? Neither you nor your parents will say, of course.

15 October 2014

Another package! The customs form honestly states »200 tobacco cigarettes,« in Romanian. There is honor among thieves.

22 October 2014

Purchase #5: Electronics > Visa Platinum credit card. Trying to achieve financial independence, RDS? Sorry, but your parents haven't given you

the technical capability to use this stolen credit-card number (which arrives immediately by email). They aren't ready for you to leave the nest just yet.



29 October 2014

Purchase #6: Drugs > Ecstasy > Pills. So many listings to choose from! Drugs, not surprisingly, dominate black markets. Increasingly it's legal pharmaceuticals people can't afford to buy at the pharmacy.

RDS orders twelve 120mg Ecstasy pills from Germany for \$48. Are they real? The seller has garnered many favorable ratings from his customers. (Blink and you could imagine you're shopping eBay.) But, those customers, why should we trust */them/*—they're criminals! Well, even if the drugs are fake, at least there's no danger of anyone getting caught in the crossfire of a vengeful shootout.

4 November 2014

The drugs arrive! Twelve cylindrical pills imprinted with Twitter's logo on one side, scored on the other (for half-dosing) and sealed in customs-fooling, DVD-shaped aluminum foil. Onto the wall they go. Gallery staff: No late-night experimentation!

On the envelope's stamp: a romantic 19th-century painting. Of the ruined Lorsch Abbey, founded in 764, largely destroyed by French soldiers in 1621.



5 November 2014

Purchase #7: Counterfeits > Clothing > \$75 Nike Air Yeezy 2 Sneakers.

The originals by Kanye West and Nike sold for \$245. Seller name: */Fake/*.

12 November 2014

Purchase #8: Electronics > Black Baseball Cap With Hidden Camera. The cam peers discreetly from a small round grommet. A robot buys a robot. Will they be friends? RDS yearns to */see/*.

19 November 2014

Purchase #9: Services > Other > Decoy letter. Bitnik notes the purchase on their website: »It seems that Random Darknet Shopper needs some time for reflection. The bot just ordered a simple plain letter to test whether its address is working correctly.« The letter's seller lists its uses:

/- to see if your roommates/parents are scrutinizing or opening your mail/

/- to test a new drop address/

/- to see if your mail is flagged or somehow otherwise interrupted/

/- to simply fill up your PO box / mailbox with something besides drug mail/

20 November 2014

Sneakers arrive. An RDS joke? In the 1992 computer-hacker thriller */Sneakers*, */Ben Kingsley* plays a jailed computer hacker fond of oracular pronouncements. »The world isn't run by weapons anymore, or energy, or money. It's run by little ones and zeroes, little bits of data. It's all just electrons ... It's not about who's got the most bullets. It's about who controls the information. What we see and hear, how we work, what we think... it's all about the information!«

Does humor belong in art? I've read that the number-one reason people abandon a sexual encounter is because someone cracks up. But in art, why not laugh? »Humor too has the role of distancing, of helping us in seeing from outside,« Weisskopf tells me. She and Smoljo have long de-personalized their art, beginning in 2002 with their choice of the impersonal collective name Bitnik. »We're not so personally involved in our work, our biography is not the main topic.«



26 November 2014

Purchase #10: Drug paraphernalia > Stashes > Sprite can. It looks like an unopened pull-tab can, but it's empty and the entire top can be lifted off. Useful for hiding things. Ecstasy, for example.

2 December 2014

Hidden-camera hat arrives. Staff: Turn it around so RDS can see the police peering in the gallery window.



3 December 2014

Purchase #11: »Counterfeits > Clothing.« Diesel jeans. Have I mentioned that counterfeit goods sell for \$1 trillion a year? These jeans would go well with a Louis Vuitton bag.

10 December 2014

Purchase #12: Forgeries > Scans/Photos > Passport scan. Is this your escape plan, RDS? Flee to Hungary?



1 January 2015

Happy New Year, RDS. [This is an automated message.]

6 January 2015

Decoy letter arrives. Untampered-with. Your mail is safe, RDS, for now.

8 January 2015

Banner day! Sprite can arrives! Jeans arrive! Exhibition complete!

Though the gallery has a thoroughly spare white-cube look, it is now like a 17th-century Dutch Golden Age */vanitas/* painting full of

expensive goods shipped in from distant shores, its ripped-open envelopes like so many orange rinds. Those paintings were sold as reminders of wealth's transience but better resemble celebrations. The objects' owner is absent, represented by his possessions. So too is RDS represented by the fruits of his shopping, which he surveys with the detachment of Delacroix's Sardanapalus.

This is the singular sight Bitnik has been building towards. Artists have long employed random chance, the postal service, shopping, and even all three together. Since 2012, a bot of artist Darius Kazemi's has bought randomly from Amazon. What makes RDS unique is it frequents the dark web and its purchases hang in a gallery, thrusting two worlds into provocative comparison. It collapses public spaces—the black market and the exhibition—one virtual, one real, both zones of freedom where (some of) the usual rules don't apply. Fortunately for RDS, as we'll see.

Artists make the things we didn't know we wanted until we saw them. They trespass ethical boundaries. They repatriate truths. They connect strangers with gossamer trust.

11 January 2015

Exhibition closes.

12 January 2015

Swiss police seize RDS and all his possessions, on the grounds that his Ecstasy might be Ecstasy. Is it illegal for a bot to buy drugs? By accident?

To Diesel's and Nike's dismay, the police take little interest in the sneakers and jeans. Forged passport? Stolen credit card number? Meh.





FROM UKRAINE.
STATUS
IS ARRIVED |

lenovo

X200s



ThinkPad

DARKNET

NAME: [REDACTED] DOMAIN: [REDACTED]
IPV4: [REDACTED] IPV6: [REDACTED]
ITEM NO: 2

ORACLE HOME (OP) : <http://op.oracle.com>
CONNECTOR FOR THE GRID (C) : www.oracle.com

LOGS
INJECTION (C) : [REDACTED]

IPV4 : [REDACTED]
IPV6 : [REDACTED]
MILLIPTS : [REDACTED] (C) : [REDACTED]

END CONNECTION (C) : [REDACTED]
MONEY : [REDACTED]

GET ALL CONNECTIONS
TOTAL_CATEGORIES : [REDACTED]

CREATE INDEX (C) : [REDACTED]
TOTAL_CATEGORIES : [REDACTED]

GETTING ALL ITEMS FROM CATEGORY
CATEGORY : [REDACTED]

ORACLE_HOME [REDACTED]

SWI : [REDACTED]

ITEMS : [REDACTED]

ITEMS : [REDACTED]

ITEMS : [REDACTED]

ITEMS : [REDACTED]

ITEMS : [REDACTED]

ITEMS : [REDACTED]

ITEMS : [REDACTED]

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ITEMS : [REDACTED]

ITEMS : [REDACTED]

ITEMS : [REDACTED]

ITEMS : [REDACTED]

15 April 2015

RDS' pills have been tested, found to contain 90mg of MDMA (not the promised 120mg), and destroyed, the police says. RDS and the rest of his goods are returned to Bitnik. They exult:

/The public prosecution ... asserts that the overweighing interest in the questions raised by the art work »Random Darknet Shopper« justify the exhibition of the drugs as artefacts, even if the exhibition does hold a small risk of endangerment of third parties through the drugs exhibited. We as well as the Random Darknet Shopper have been cleared of all charges. This is a great day for the bot, for us and for freedom of art!/
/

24 September 2015

Happy first birthday RDS!

25 November 2015

After a seven-month hiatus, RDS has moved to London, to Horatio Junior Gallery, which is run by a young art dealer out in a former Victorian pub in the London residential neighborhood of Rotherhithe. The contrast between the bot's new and old homes underscores the reach of the modern black market, the fact that every location on earth with an address can receive most any good. The volume of global deliveries, at least 13 billion a year, ensures very few parcels will be searched.

The dark web liberates artists as much as capitalists to deliver anything to anyone. No government protects them there from their conscious or unconscious desires, or from bad luck. Would Weisskopf and Smoljo countenance RDS paying for, say, child porn? They say that stuff

isn't sold on black markets, but rather peer to peer. They wouldn't let him shop anywhere they'd seen it for sale. If he */did/* buy some, they'd do everything possible to cancel the sale, though they admit that might not be possible. What about his infringing on drug laws and copyright? »I'm not sure what I buy in supermarkets is a lot better, in morality terms,« Carmen says.

Alas, Agora has shut down, has gone darker than dark, feeling the hot breath of international authorities on its neck, apparently. No matter, the world has plenty of other dark places to shop. */Arrivederci /Agora Shop, /buongiorno /Alpha Bay!*

While at Horatio Junior, RDS will make 8 purchases. Meanwhile, I've asked Bitnik to answer questions randomly lifted from Proust, including »What is your biggest fault?«:

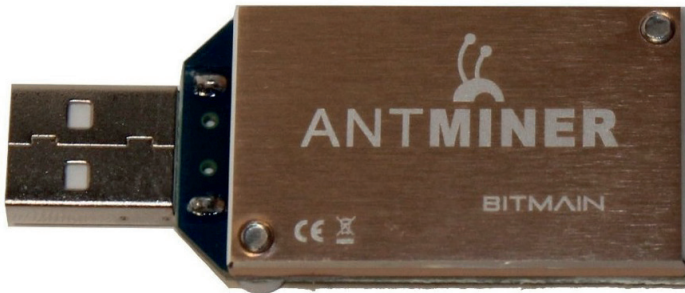
/After every work, we tend to jump into a new topic. That is wrong. Artworks can get better if they're done multiple times. We should carry a topic for a longer time, squish the most out of it. We leave things unsaid, a lot of potential behind, because we get carried away./

For his first purchase in his new home, RDS buys a \$35 fake Lacoste t-shirt. A timeless choice. But not a very sensible one for the London winter.

2 December 2015

RDS pays \$25 for two Bitcoin mining devices. How much more meta can he get? If he were to develop his own income stream, create backup copies of himself on computers around the world, and acquire some chatbot capabilities ... could he finally move out of his parents' basement? Probably not by himself, but what if someone helped him, monkeyed with his code? What if someone then gave Super-RDS thousands of brothers?

»This is one of reasons we haven't published code, we need to deal with these questions,« Smoljo says.



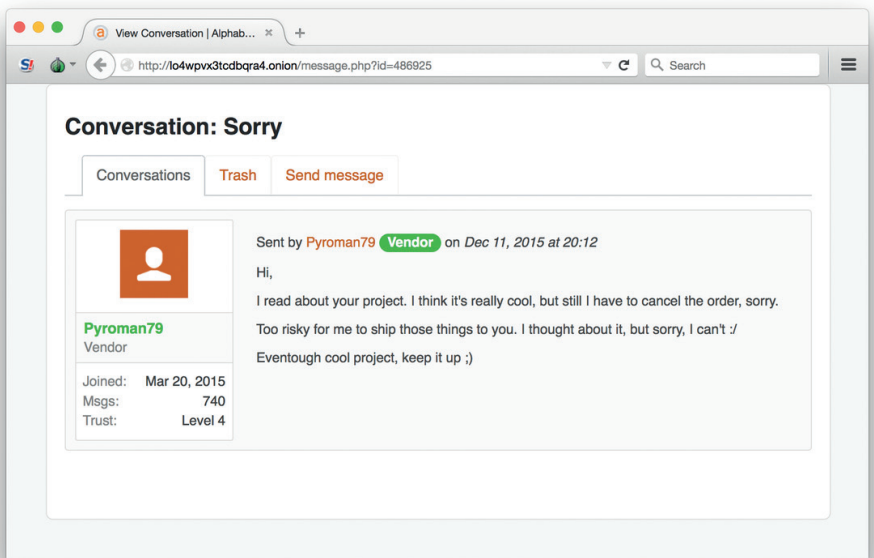
9 December 2015

The t-shirt arrives from Thailand. It looks awfully real. Has the fake been faked? Thieves posing as counterfeiters? Today's also a buying day. RDS goes online, chooses a category: »Weapons.« Oh no! RDS, your parents are concerned! Fortunately, he opts for small Polish triangle firecrackers. From /Pyroman79/.

11 December 2015

RDS is unmasked! Pyroman79 writes him, »I read about your project. I think it's really cool, but still I have to cancel the order, sorry. Too risky for me to ship those things to you.« Sorry, RDS. There is nothing more dangerous than an honest man.

How did Pyroman79 know RDS is a bot? He is exceptionally good at mimicking human behavior. He can even solve captchas, those little text-recognition puzzles that websites make you solve to prove that you are a human. It was, apparently, his username that gave him away: RandomDarknetShopper. And the fact that Alpha Bay had publicly celebrated his interest in the market as confirmation of its superior market position.



I applaud Pyroman79's honesty. The dark web often seems better-lit than the open or surface webs, free of the control of states and megacorporations, embracing and interconnecting a fuller slice of humanity. Try navigating from Apple's website to, say, Wikileaks, using only your mouse. At last check, Apple.com had just four external links!

RDS may be the only player on the dark web /not /concealing his identity. Which has made him something of a celebrity. Hence Pyroman79's problem: There is no good pr for an illegal seller (or buyer). Anonymity is the point of the dark web. Everyone on it is required to conceal their identity with the encrypted web browser Tor. Dark sites are invisible to casual users surfing the »open« or »surface« web with, say, Safari or Explorer. This is part of its fascination for Bitnik:

/On surface webs, you need to constantly perform your role in society. Your Twitter and your Instagram are linked to your name. In deep webs or dark nets you're free to have a second life that doesn't need to be consistent with the rest of your online activity. In a time of mass surveillance, anonymity is a prerequisite for many professionals (journalists, activists) and for many minorities (queers, gays, religious minorities, etc). So maybe the people who do not use it on a daily basis are just the lucky ones./

Unlike most everyone else, RDS has the same identity on the open and dark webs. Which makes him a conduit between the two. And a threat.

16 December 2015

Foiled again! RDS tries to buy a \$0.99 electronic copy of »Mastering the Art of French Cooking,« that 1961 classic of international cultural appropriation, but the seller cancels the sale.

23 December 2015

RDS buys an \$80 »voice-changing« cell phone from his old friend /Fake./ RDS is apparently desperate to mask the distinctive sound of his zeros and ones.



30 December 2015

He buys 1,825,380 email addresses scraped from several American shopping websites. A bargain at \$100, no? A scam? If they are real, does RDS have a message for the world?



Massivi Matumona

264 The Ridgeway
St. Albans

FONT = OpenSymbol size =50px
Hertfordshire
AL4 9XQ

Good news - our gas rates have gone down again

We have reduced our gas rates for the second time this year.

Our Commitment to You

To receive our Social Obligations leaflet, detailing a record of the performance of British Gas regarding our social obligations to customers, please call 0845 955 5200. Lines are open 8am to 8pm Monday to Friday, 8am to 6pm Saturday.



Questions? go to www.house.co.uk/billing
0845 955 5300

We are open Weekdays 8am-8pm,
and on Sat 8am-6pm.
Your calls may be monitored and
or recorded for quality assurance.
Please read page 2 before calling.

Our busiest day is Monday and
our busiest times are between
9am -11.30am and between
6pm-8pm. If you are able to call
outside these peak hours, it will
help us to answer your call
more quickly.

Customer Reference Number: **1382 7913 3658**

Bill date 28 MAR 2015 font = sans 38px

Your gas bill

Please pay **£167.73** now.

Billing summary

Billing Period 28 Feb - 28 Mar
sans 31 px

Your last bill **£248.46**
in debit

Payments received - thank you **£248.46**
credit

£248.46 Postal Payment

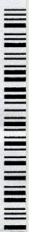
Gas you've used **£159.74**
(actual reading) Please turn over for detail →

VAT at 5% **£7.99**

Please pay **£167.73**

See below for ways to pay.

Thank you for choosing British Gas



Gas meter point reference 8437854553

6 January 2016

RDS wants proof of residency. He orders a scan of a British Gas bill, which arrives immediately.

13 January 2016

Final purchase at Horatio Junior: Random Darknet Shopper orders a digital PDF file titled »Hacking a Coca Cola Machine«

/In this guide I'll tell you how to hack into a coke machine, the amount of things you can do with this depends on what year the machine was made in. /

/Things you can do with this: /

/- Get all the change out /

/- Get a free soda /

/- Change all the prices/

The only thing like Coca-Cola is Coca-Cola itself.

Coke adds life.

Always real.

Jon Lackman
RANDOM DARKNET SHOPPER

PostScript^{UM} #23
Series edited by Janez Janša



Publisher: Aksioma – Institute for Contemporary Art, Ljubljana
www.aksioma.org | aksioma@aksioma.org

Represented by: Marcela Okretič

Design: Luka Umek
Layout: Sonja Grdina

Cover and pp. 5, 7, 8, 10, 11, 12, 20, 21, 24
Photo courtesy: !Mediengruppe Bitnik
pp. 14-15
Photo: Florian Bachmann, Kunst Halle St. Gallen, 2015
pp. 4, 16-17
Photo courtesy: Gunnar Meier, Kunst Halle St. Gallen, 2014
pp. 23
Photo courtesy: Horatio Junior London, 2016

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Printed and distributed by: Lulu.com | www.lulu.com

Project realized in the framework of Masters & Servers | www.mastersandservers.org



Published on the occasion of the exhibition:

!Mediengruppe Bitnik
Random Darknet Shopper
www.aksioma.org/random.darknet.shopper

Aksioma | Project Space
Komenskega 18, Ljubljana, Slovenia
24 February–25 March 2016

Supported by the Creative Europe Programme of the European Union, the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Slovenia, the Municipality of Ljubljana and the Swiss Arts Council Pro Helvetia.



Co-funded by the
Creative Europe Programme
of the European Union



REPUBLIC OF SLOVENIA
MINISTRY OF CULTURE



City of
Ljubljana

swiss arts council

prohelvetia

This project has been funded with support from the European Commission. This publication reflects the views only of the author, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

