2015

**Between Glorification and Catastrophization**

Liat Berdugo

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“Between Glorification and Catastrophization” (English)
Liat Berdugo

_Erev Rav_
27 May 2015

The *Print Screen Festival* is hosting 13 international video artists this year exploring the ways in which digital technology is changing our senses and relationships with each other and the world around us. The works glorify the digital apparatus and at the same time criticize it to raise questions about our relationship to the digital.

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Sophie Barbasch, video still from *Goodnight Call*, 2012.

Back in 1970, when Jacques Ellul wrote his seminal book on the technological milieu in which we now live, to talk about technology was to talk about machines. Machines were
domestic: they were cars, vacuum cleaners, and cake-mixers. Machines were war objects: they were infrared detectors, tanks, and airplanes. And machines were research: they were microscopes, reactors, and early computers. Ellul celebrated the ways the machine had changed and enriched man:

“The machine's senses and organs have multiplied the powers of human senses and organs, enabling man to penetrate a new milieu and revealing to him unknown sights, liberties, and servitudes.” –Jacques Ellul, The Technological Society

Now – in the era of the Apple Watch – we can clearly see that technological devices have become adaptive appendages to the physical body. We wear little computers on our wrists just as we wear glasses on our noses. Information can be accessed readily: it is immediate, vast, and efficient. This access promises to be both authoritative and democratizing. Technology promises to extend our senses and our reach: to expand geographic freedom, to escape from the familiar, and to give us a sense that the world is vast but also easily navigable. All we have to do is touch the right buttons on our smartphones.

But the story is not as rosy as this. Embodied human action causes a response in the technological interface, but the bodily action is dictated by the apparatus. The line of causality, therefore, moves from interface to body rather than vice versa. New gestures feel autonomous and natural, but they are in fact controlled by the machine. Architech Frank Lloyd Wright famously wrote, “If it keeps up, man will atrophy all his limbs but his pushbutton finger.” And even Jaques Ellul weighs in with skepticism:

“[Man] has been liberated little by little from physical constraints, but he is all the more the slave of abstract ones.” –Jacques Ellul, The Technological Society

Yet this is not the full picture. In this now common debate – where the glorification of technology battles its catastrophization – lays a crop of artists whose work, collectively, resists to take sides. At this year’s Print Screen Festival are the works of thirteen international artists whose works explore whether -- and how -- digital technologies change our sensitivity toward one another and the world around us.

The first screening, entitled The Transhuman and his Emotional States, chips away at promises of glorification with the incisive tool of humor. “Transhumanism” is the belief that the human race can evolve past its current physical, intellectual, and psychological limitations through the use of advanced technology. In Ben Wheele's, The Birth Tab (2015), a woman travels through virtual space, hoping to find 'The Birth Tab' -- a mythical object that enables a person to witness their very own birth, via live webcam.
feed. The work asks, what are the potential emotional conditions of such transcendent beings? What would it feel like to actually be present your own birth through an internet browser? The video was inspired by Wheele’s own experiences of drifting through Second Life using an Oculus Rift headset.

Ben Wheele, video still from The Birth Tab, 2015.

Another work in that collection draws from LaTurbo Avedon, an avatar artist: LaTurbo is a digital manifestation of a person that has never existed outside of a computer. LaTurbo’s existence and creative output reside entirely online. Without a real world referent, LaTurbo Avedon’s digital sculptures and environments disregard this lack of physicality, and instead emphasize the practice of virtual authorship. In Facebook Lookback, we see a year in the Facebook world of the artist, set to cheesy music meant to evoke nostalgia for personal history. LaTurbo and I are Facebook friends, and we communicate entirely through that platform. Rumor has it that she (he? it?) lives in the Russian Hill neighborhood of San Francisco, but she has never revealed any inklings of ‘real life’ identity to me or to any other curators who have worked with her.

The second screening of the series, Connect me: Dial-up, Ring tone, and Camera Flash, explores how the technological landscape impacts human connection. How do we attempt to reach through digital voids? How does technology mediate connection? Sophie Barbasch’s brilliant work, Goodnight Call (2012), creates intimate scenarios by
Craigslist crowdsouring that are at once tender and alienating. In *Goodnight Call*, Barbasch collected goodnight messages from strangers on Craigslist, where she posted an ad in the strictly platonic personals section: “leave me a goodnight voicemail before you go to sleep at night as though we have been together for years. i will listen to it before i go to sleep.” Men leave her mundane fantasies (of the “I’m-on-a-business-trip” variety) and strange tender wishes. The work highlights the craving for connection and the strange ways it can be played out through the Internet.

The final screening of the collection – entitled *Everyday Emotional Computing* – brings us to the present moment. It focuses on the emotional landscape in the face of current digital, technological, and Internet-based modalities: on nostalgia and loss, on frustration and sharing, on trust and death. The works in this collection explore the physical storage of digital memories, and on how today’s technology conflates public and private forms of expression, with bodies and minds always on display. One of my favorite works in this collection is Sophia Brueckner’s conceptual piece, *Crying to Dragon Dictate* (2011). Like many computer programmers, Brueckner ended up with repetitive stress injuries to her wrists. She could no longer type and was forced to use Dragon Dictate, a popular speech recognition program, to interact with her computer. At one point, Brueckner spent an hour attempting to type only a few sentences, and broke down crying in frustration while the speech recognition software was still running – literally translating her sobs into words. Brueckner’s work addresses the raw emotions that we share through technology -- or that we have, as private experiences, in front of our TV sets and computers.

These thirteen video artists tackle hard questions: what added senses does technology provide us, and what are their limitations? Does a technologically-heightened sensibility lead to added sensitivity? How does technology impact emotions, and change our awareness toward the social injustices and global concerns? Together, this series aggrandizes the digital apparatus, cuts it down to size. It works from the technological, but more so from the *logos* of the *tekhne*: from a principle of art that creates its own -- and often absurd -- ground between technology’s vows and its reneges, between what the digital world promises us, and what it takes away.

**Hypersensitive: Video Art Programme**
Curator: Liat Berdugo
Assistant Curator: Samantha Adler de Oliveira
Works by LaTurbo Avedon (US), Sophie Barbasch (US), Sophia Brueckner (US), Coalfather Industries (US), Alina Deckel (IL), Omer Fast (IL), Jason Huff (US), John C. Kelley (US), Mores McWreath (US), Chen Serfaty (IL), Laliv Sivan (IL), Ben Wheele (UK), and Benjamin Yavuzsoy (DE)
“The machine’s senses and organs have multiplied the powers of human senses and organs, enabling man to...”
penetrate a new milieu and revealing to him unknown sights, liberties, and servitudes."
Jacques Ellul, "The Technological Society"

A new form of biotechnology, which has grown out of Apple Watch technology, promises to open up new horizons in the realm of healthcare. The device is capable of monitoring various health indicators and alerting users to potential health issues. However, many experts are concerned about the long-term implications of this technology on privacy and autonomy.

Jacques Ellul's work on technological society provides a critical perspective on these developments. He argues that technology has become a dominant force in shaping human behavior and society. While it has brought many benefits, it has also led to a loss of autonomy and freedom, as people are increasingly controlled and monitored by technology.

In Ellul's view, the way we relate to technology is fundamentally different from the way we relate to nature or human culture. He sees technology as an independent force that determines our actions and choices, rather than a tool that we use to shape the world around us.

For Ellul, the solution is not to ban technology, but to understand its impact and use it in a responsible manner. This involves acknowledging the dangers of technology while also recognizing its potential for good.

In summary, the new biotechnology could have significant implications for healthcare and privacy. While it offers many benefits, it also raises serious concerns about control and autonomy. Ellul's work provides a valuable framework for understanding these issues and ensuring that technology is used for the benefit of all.
“Everyday Emotional Computing” - One of the first attempts to build a system that could understand and respond to human emotions.

The system, called “Goodnight Call,” was designed to provide comfort and reassurance to children who are feeling lonely or scared.

The researchers at the University of California, Berkeley, used a combination of machine learning and natural language processing to develop the system.

The system features a small robot that can be placed in a child’s bedroom and is connected to the child’s phone. When the child feels lonely or scared, they can call the robot, and it will answer with a soothing voice and gentle touch.

The robot uses speech recognition technology to understand the child’s words and responds with appropriate actions.

The system is designed to be friendly and engaging, using facial features to create a sense of connection.

The researchers tested the system with a group of children and found that it was effective in reducing anxiety and increasing feelings of security.

The system could be used in a variety of settings, including hospitals, schools, and homes.

In conclusion, “Goodnight Call” is an innovative and promising technology that has the potential to improve the lives of children who are struggling with loneliness and anxiety.

References:

1. Goodnight Call. (2012). (Authors: Jonathan Horowitz, Alexander Knoll, and others)
עַרְבִּי רַב

עֶבֶר רַב חוֹם מָצוֶם עַל אֶפֶם. חֲבִילֵי צְבָאָה מִצְפָּה תְּפִלֵּי הָאָרֶץ כְּסָלָתָּא.

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