DUTY FREE

Fabio Lattanzi Antinori
Veronika Krenn & Davide Bevilacqua
Bob Bicknell-Knight
Lydia Blakeley
Elliott Burns
Toby Christian
Joshua Citarella
Elliot Dodd
IKO
Bex Ilsley
Perce Jerrom
Claire Jervert
Vanessa Kowalski
Lucy Ludlow
Émilie Brout & Maxime Marion
Jillian Mayer
Jonathan Monaghan
Jake Moore
Molly Soda
Rustan Söderling
Puck Verkade
Wade Wallerstein
Willem Weismann
Hanae Wilke
Thomas Yeomans
Laura Yuile

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At this current juncture in history we continue to watch the revolution that is Industry 4.0 transform and contort our everyday lives, encouraging a new era of manufacturing that has taken on the label of 'smart' through the integration of the IoT, AI, cyber-physical systems, and Cloud and cognitive computing. During this autonomous movement we continue to see the corporatisation and co-option of public space, on and offline, transforming how we navigate through cities with the rise of the share economy, or the precarious economy dubbed by its dedicated labourers, alongside social networks becoming unrecognisable and akin to the NSA, developing targeted, algorithmically produced ads and troll farms, harvesting and utilising your data to expand hyper-capitalist conglomerates and increasingly totalitarian agendas.

Amidst the rubble of a pre-internet utopian neoliberal ideology, where corporations are supposedly more trustworthy than governments, algorithms have been permitted to run free, evolving and reproducing at an alarming rate. Where is the hole that the human race slots into within this new world? Will we still be needed? Were we ever? How does an artist function when an android has the ability to produce a priceless work of art, or a painting farm in a far-off country can be commissioned over the internet to produce yet another copy of the Mona Lisa? Soon, androids and AI systems will be competing alongside us, as equals and individuals in a new world order, eventually inserting themselves onto every rung of the societal ladder.

The following book and accompanying exhibition of the same name seeks to analyse these contemporary consumerist questions and ideological quandaries, with the book featuring documentation from the exhibition and a number of essays grappling with these increasingly pertinent subjects, from the corporatisation of public space and the influx of utopian ideals to the automation of industry and everyday activities accompanied by the capitalisation and utilisation of the internet as a space for corporate ownership within an increasingly gamified culture.

Bob Bicknell-Knight, director of *isthisit?* and curator of *Duty Free*

The following book features contributions from Fabio Lattanzi Antinori, Veronika Krenn & Davide Bevilacqua, Bob Bicknell-Knight, Lydia Blakeley, Elliott Burns, Toby Christian, Joshua Citarella, Elliot Dodd, Bex Ilsley, IKO, Perce Jerrom, Claire Jervert, Vanessa Kowalski, Lucy Ludlow, Émilie Brout & Maxime Marion, Jillian Mayer, Jonathan Monaghan, Jake Moore, Molly Soda, Rustan Söderling, Puck Verkade, Wade Wallerstein, Willem Weismann, Hanae Wilke, Thomas Yeomans and Laura Yuile.
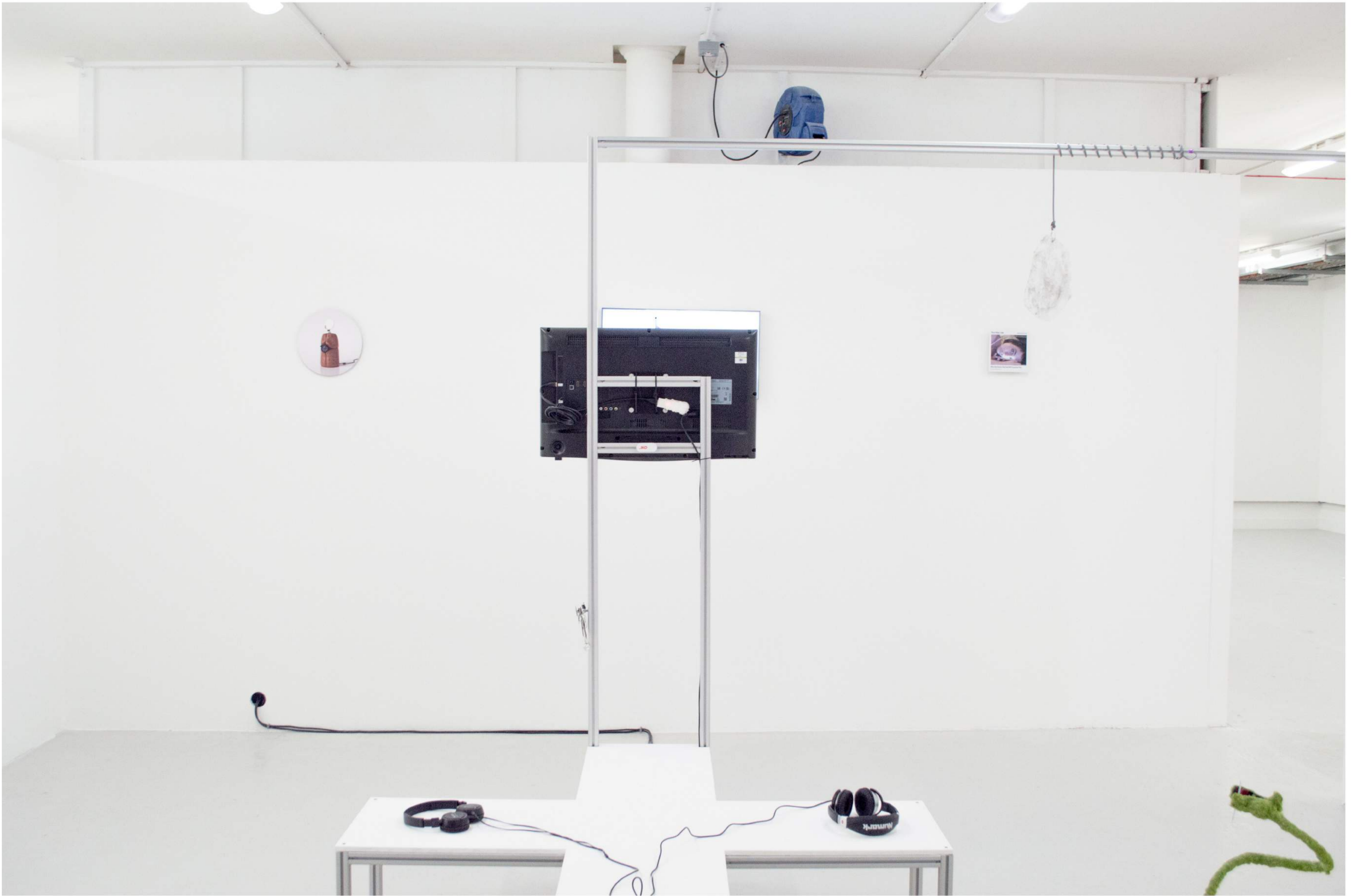
Duty Free
Installation View, 2018

Duty Free
Installation View, 2018

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In conversation with... Bob Bicknell-Knight

Elliott Burns

Founded by Bob Bicknell-Knight in April 2016, isthisit? began life as a succession of weekly exhibitions, assemblages of video, audio and visual content, rapidly prototyping the curatorial possibilities of the browser window. Simultaneously, isthisit? facilitated a testing ground for young emerging artists and formed an informal network of mutually beneficial collective advocacy. Making it a key member in the growing field of online galleries.

Soon afterwards followed offline exhibitions (as isthisit? terms them, referencing the normalisation of online shows), a monthly residency program, online shows by guest curators, a book series tackling topics of digital technology, interviews and an online shop selling digital editions and 3d printed USBs containing isthisit? content.

Constantly open, always inviting visitors to 'send an email', the model employed by isthisit? has permitted a meteoric expansion in its first two years, evoking the hyperactive accounts of Hans-Ulrich Obrist's youth. Now counting 600+ artists, curators and practitioners of one form or the other amongst its contributors, the 'Artists' tab has become a directory, suggesting a gallery that verges towards a being a social media platform.

Today Bicknell-Knight is preparing for his latest exhibition, Duty Free, which brings together a long list of artists, duos and collectives, including: Émilie Brout & Maxime Marion, Joshua Citarella, Elliot Dodd and Molly Soda alongside Bicknell-Knight himself. Looking to the near future, Duty Free promises an examination of where our hyper-consumerist, algorithmic, corporate-led society may go. Tinged of

course with the tone of mild dissatisfaction that isthisit? evokes.

Elliott: On the isthisit? 'About' page, the site is referred to as a 'platform' rather than gallery, a term that seems a recognition of the utilitarian service you provide of highlighting the work of emerging artists, whilst simultaneously reflecting an openness akin to social media services. Could you talk a little about how the isthisit? model was established and what you believe to be its strongest assets?

Bob: I began isthisit? by being fundamentally interested in what it means to be a curator, slowly recognising that you ultimately end up wearing a number of different hats and taking on various responsibilities and roles, many of which from an outside perspective one wouldn't overtly identify with the role of a curator.

For me the term platform evolved out of this curatorial experimentation, with isthisit? slowly picking up various roles that a curator has the ability to become, from publisher to invigilator, and ultimately taking on more responsibilities than an average curator, transforming into a platform rather than a curator in the most stereotypical sense. The idea of a platform feels a lot more prestigious and weighty to me, a corporate front that hides the man behind the curtain.

Even though the online shows have slowly become less of a focus point to what I'm attempting to achieve with isthisit? I think they're still incredibly important to me in regards to the assets that isthisit? possesses. They have an embedded grounding of countless hours spent emailing artists and uploading images and video URLs to the internet. However, in retrospect the book series probably has the strongest impact and weight to it, in the very obvious sense that they're physical objects but also in that over the course of four books there have been something like 30 or so essays, nearly 200 artists and around 700 actual pages of content included. I think that kind of weight visualised in a physical form is still incredibly important, even if what I do is predominantly based in the digital.

Elliott: Being online, building relationships digitally, permits a level of mystery, allowing as you say the ability to engender a more corporate presence. How have you felt working with artists where your identity is somewhat obscured behind a "curtain" and equally theirs too may be polished, exaggerated or undersold?

Bob: I haven't ever felt like an artist has oversold themselves to me online, I usually undergo a fair amount of research into the people I work with before initiating contact. So if they have a website I'll look at past work and shows, read their blog, find their LinkedIn alongside browsing through their various social media presences. Of course, this is all online and could be fabricated, but that would be a lot of work to simply be in an exhibition I'm organising.

I much prefer meeting people offline, chatting at private views or going on a studio visit, there's a lot more trust involved in the relationship between artist and curator when you meet in that way. I like the corporate facing structure but at times it can be detrimental to a relationship that you're attempting to build. I think the isthisit? identity is much stronger than my own personal one, an identity that's basically running everything that isthisit? does, so when talking

with artists and planning shows hopefully they're seeing me and what I do on a personal level rather than the corporate persona. If I had more time I'd meet everyone I work with face to face.

Elliott: On Instagram, isthisit? has a bit over four thousand followers; on Facebook close to one point five thousand. Structured for easy perusing, Instagram in particular, seems now to be the front end of many arts organisations' public relations. Equally for the curator it offers a parallel to the degree show as a site to search out new artistic talent. What changes do you feel these platforms have made to the curator <—> artist and the gallery <—> public relationships?

Bob: The advent of these platforms, facilitating the perusal of hundreds of thousands of artists and artworks at any given time, has certainly made the curatorial process 'easier' to an extent. The ability to scroll through someone's feed, be it an artist or gallery, tracking their progress and easily viewing their work, is both exciting and assumedly incredibly detrimental to the conceptual rigour that's usually hidden behind the glossy images that you see on a daily basis.

As a curator who's slowly amassing a following on social media, I too think having a strong presence is incredibly important. Both as a tool to 'get' things, from being offered opportunities to be on panels and gaining access to spaces to exhibit, to (hopefully) gaining valuable insight from your followers (the people who you're ultimately producing this work for) whilst throwing your own opinion out there too.

It's a lot easier to be 'called out' on certain issues, or to simply question why things are a certain way.

When I visit an exhibition I'll take a picture, post a comment or two whilst tagging the artist and gallery. More often than not I'll get a response from both the institution and the artist, if I was positive they might thank me for visiting and if I was negative they will potentially question my criticism, telling me a little more about the work and beginning a dialogue. For me this begins to bridge the gap between the artist and viewer, which I'm all for.

Elliott: Do you find the same happening back at you? Do you get critiqued through social media at all?

Bob: I have been critiqued online once or twice regarding the exhibitions I've held, but nothing hugely influential or thought provoking. The majority of the critique or conversations I have are with these artists and galleries critiquing my critique of their work. I would love my exhibitions to be critiqued more, to be questioned. If not I'm ultimately in my own bubble where I assume everyone is fairly ambivalent to what I'm producing.

Of course I have offline conversations with artists, fellow curators and people who see the exhibitions, but the online aspect interests me a lot more. As we've seen with the rise of Reddit and 4chan, communities of predominantly anonymous individuals, critique thrives behind the safety of the screen. I think I'd like to be critiqued more through social media, a space that allows the critic to share their thoughts behind that delicate glass.

Elliott: Anonymity has taken on certain negative interpretation recently, yet for a time (pre-Facebook) it seemed to be the norm. How do you feel looking back on that often romanticised moment before web 2.0 altered the internet landscape? And

correspondingly what do you think of where we are now, where we willingly submit our real details?

Bob: I think pre-Facebook, pre-corporations pushing the idea of an individual identity being this incredibly important aspect of online living, people young and old were always on the same level. I'm too young to have interacted with these types of bulletin boards but it does seem like a beautiful conceit; everyone so excited to be connecting through the world wide web that you wouldn't think to troll. On the other hand, I don't know if this wonderful depiction of the past is true, and all my early memories of the internet consist of incredibly slow browsing speeds and the sound of a screeching modem. I generally subscribe to the idea that we're currently living through one of the 'best' times in human history to be alive, with high life expectancies, revolutionary medicines and access to high speed internet across the world. I'm very doubtful anyone would truly want to go back to that early point of web 1.0.

The old quote 'If you're not paying, you're the product' comes to mind with regards to willingly submitting details and giving over our own time and data to these social networks. Oddly enough I usually come to the conclusion that I'm okay with being part of the product, part of the over 2 billion Facebook users submitting their name, age and various other details to become part of the system. It's an unusual predicament that I and probably many others find themselves in. Who would willingly pay money for Instagram, Facebook or Twitter? Information is much more valuable.

Elliott: Your upcoming exhibition, Duty Free, positions itself, and us, in the dystopian reality which

is emerging from the "rubble of a pre-internet utopian neoliberal ideology", a place where consumerist desires lead to our eventual obsolescence. In your day to day life where do you personally see cause for such concern?

Bob: The quite reactionary language and position that I'm attempting to take with the show is of course, perhaps quite obviously, partly influenced by the upsurge of news surrounding Cambridge Analytica's involvement in various political events over the past few years. The fact that data mining has become commonplace, enabling targeted ads and mass market manipulation to occur throughout the internet and social media is a worrying idea, on a personal and public level.

When it's discovered that the world is dominated by companies influencing everything from government policy to your daily intake of news, and you realise that their primary focus is on marketing products to you as a consumer, I feel myself inclined to worry for the future. A future that will have incredibly reduced government regulations, allowing companies to do whatever they want in search of the almighty dollar, ultimately reaching peak neo-liberalism and facilitating no one but the uber rich.

Elliott: Cambridge Analytica is being treated as a turning point in public awareness. Yet, I have a scepticism as to whether this will induce any sea change in how we engage with online platforms. Do you see any speculative futures envisioned by the arts as an alternative to the seemingly inevitable?

Bob: I'm inclined to agree that it won't be a dramatic turning point, everyone thought that the Snowden revelations would be a turning point and it kind of

was, but not one that flipped the world, changing how we act on a day to day basis. Everyone keeps going to work, living their life, using social media and documenting their lives whilst continuing to accept a fresh set of terms and conditions whenever their chosen device initiates an unwanted update.

Most artists seem to respond to the inevitable dystopian future not so dissimilarly to how the media reacts in times of chaos; thriving and capitalising on the overwhelming distress by pushing the idea further. A reaction to this sort of narrative was actually proposed by the collaborative duo *patten* a few months ago in early 2018 at their solo show at Tenderpixel in London, titled 3049. Alongside the exhibition reimagining various distinctly dystopian science fiction scenarios in popular blockbuster films it was accompanied by a publication consisting of over 50 contributors, all responding to the question 'How do we make it to 3049?'.

This was a fantastic conceit, although I still think both utopian and dystopian portrayals of the future are equally valid. If there was only one narrative it would be like switching on the news and only seeing one side of a given argument, even if this is already happening all too frequently, an example of this being Jeremy Corbyn continually being portrayed negatively by the BBC, or just generally all the fake news that continues to fill my newsfeed.

Elliott: Between the exhibition and the accompanying publication you've got possibly surveyed the opinions of a similar number of artists as patten did. Where do you believe their estimations of the future fall on the utopian / dystopian fence?

Bob: Most of the work in the show probably takes a negative stance, which could be considered stereotypical, although as mentioned previously I do believe that as an artist and curator you have a – sort of – duty to reflect what's occurring in contemporary politics and the world in general, which seems to be breaking down on every rung of the societal ladder.

One of the more subtler pieces featured in the show is from Jillian Mayer, titled Value Indicator (2018) and manifesting as a small brass keyring emblazoned with the forward-thinking survivalist statement "FIND IN CASE OF EMERGENCY", referencing preppers and the apocalyptic mentality that's overwhelming the youth of today.

Another work, a video by Jonathan Monaghan titled Escape Pod (2015), sees a golden deer traverse through environments of affluence and authority, encountering a riot gear boutique, immigration checkpoints and a duty free store in the clouds. The video is played as an endless repeat, subtly looping forever, with the newly born deer being continually overwhelmed by these beautiful depictions of abuse, surveillance and the state. Monaghan's depicted world is beautiful, but so are the luxury apartments that continue to be built throughout London.

All of the work will be displayed on or around an aluminium structure in the shape of Primecoin, a cryptocurrency whose symbol is in the shape of the Greek letter Psi. This could be seen as a warning against crypto, against the sharing economy and peer-to-peer infrastructures, although I hope it's a little more ambiguous than that.

Elliott: Beautiful depictions of abuse, speaks to how beguiling new technologies can be, even if they are

stepping on long held freedoms. I'm sure many people won't mind paying the price. I'm sure we're all partly sleep-walking into this future. I'd like to close by asking you about your personal relationship with technology, what do you use on a daily basis, what couldn't you live without, what do you want to disconnect from, what are you looking forward to?

Bob: I tend to agree, right now it feels like we're allowing ourselves to be seduced by the tech, not really worrying too much about what's being taken away, more interested in what's coming next, being drip fed by an industry slowly eking out 'evolutionary' technological developments. Although perhaps that's just me being unaware and letting it happen without putting up much of a fight...

I have a PC, not a MacBook, as well as an android smartphone, both of which are incredibly dated at this point, although that's more a monetary concern rather than a conscious decision to use old tech. I was recently given an Amazon Echo, at first it was fun but now I keep it unplugged. I'm not sure why, it just feels creepy, the always on, always 'listening' aspect is incredibly disconcerting, even if my phone has the ability to function in the same way.

Bearing this in mind I am partly looking forward to the future, smart homes becoming the norm and laptops becoming lighter, although it's the caveats that accompany these moments of supposed bliss that worry me, like personal data being sold, content being curated for you and social credit systems being implemented. This future feels more Black Mirror esq. than the utopias portrayed in Ursula Le Guin's communist novels, dividing labour and rejecting future economies.

Elliott: Do you feel bad about turning Alexa off?

Bob: Oddly enough, as the Echo was a gift I feel bad about not utilising it, so any emotional connection I have to the object is a reaction to a distinctly human act, rather than a betrayal of the voice inside the machine.

Popular sci-fi has taught and encouraged us that robots will be developed in the form of the human image, replications of their creators, primarily due to the want and need for an emotional connection. In the long run I highly doubt this will be the case, once AIs begin to evolve by themselves I assume they'll be able to develop and create new, stronger, faster forms than a human could ever come up with, distinctly different from anything we might assume an android or robot to be.

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Elliott Burns (b.1989, UK) is an independent curator and writer who lives between London and Mexico City. He is the co-founder of the online gallery Off Site Project and has worked on numerous exhibitions for the University of the Arts London. His writing has appeared in ThisIsTomorrow, Curating the Contemporary and other smaller publications.

Jonathan Monaghan
Escape Pod, 2015
Video (colour, sound), screen or projector
20 min loop. Music by Furniteur

27   28

Jillian Mayer
Value Indicator, 2018
Brass
3.8 x 3.8 cm
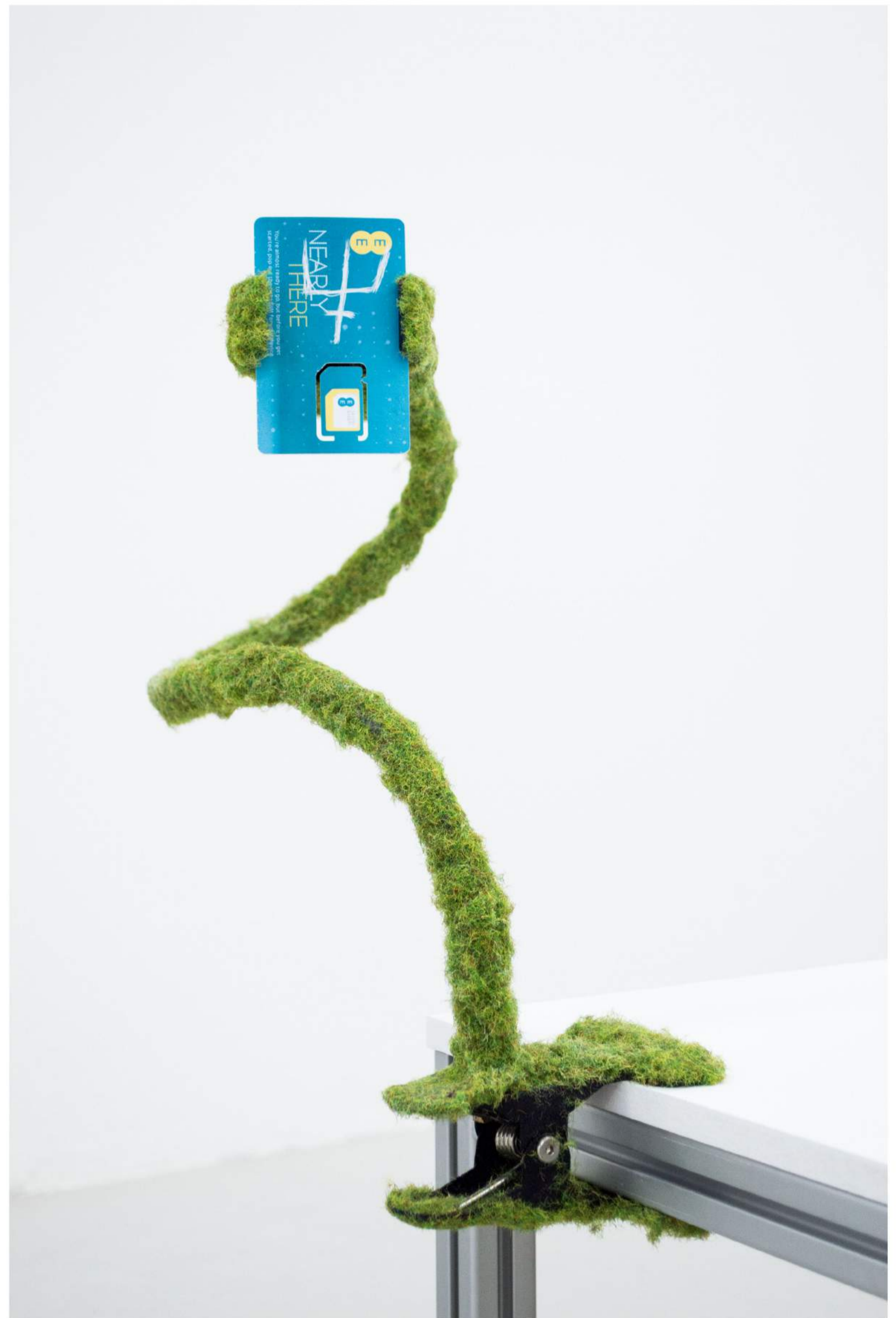
Bob Bicknell-Knight
Relic I, 2018
Universal mount holder, artificial grass, SIM card
50 x 20 x 20 cm

Lydia Blakeley
You're Doing Amazing Sweetie (Kim's house), 2018
Oil on canvas
66 x 42 x 3 cm

31   32

Elliot Dodd
Denver, 2017
UV printed steel, PU foam
89 x 28 x 44 cm

Bob Bicknell-Knight
Islands, 2018
C-Type prints on aluminium dibond, stainless steel threaded rod, metal nuts
30 x 40 x 30 cm

Hanae Wilke
Echo, 2016
Steel, house paint
95 x 100 x 4 cm

How to Avoid Getting the Bends

Vanessa Kowalski

The lexicon of digital technology once basked in the glow of a utopian halo, but is one now characterized by a deep-sea darkness; devices are like bottomless portals, something like an addiction that swallows first time users, hardened abusers, enthusiasts and junkies alike. The 'real world' is often seen as something one can escape by being online, or as some accelerationists propose: being online might allow for the destruction of the world as we know it.[1] While accelerationism may be a reactionary fantasy —one that purports that if capital continues to conquer, humanity[2] should not resist but rather surrender and advance it to apocalyptic proportions so that a new world order might emerge like a phoenix from the techno-ash—this is a future built upon the exploitations of the present, one which remains unknown and yet already polluted by the outsourced responsibility of today.

We're already in too deep however, and deceleration or complete withdrawal are not viable options either. In order to avoid getting the bends, as Benjamin Noys writes, "Our task today is to collectively sustain forms of struggle and negation that do not offer false consolation [...] Starting from misery might instead involve developing forms of politicization that could not only recognize misery but delink from what causes us misery."[3] As the saying goes: misery loves company. And companies love misery.

The incentives for artificial intelligence are born from a desire to both alleviate and profit from the maladies of modern life (work hard, play never), and although their innards are algorithmically programmed, such super machines are doomed to inherit the digital DNA of their despondent predecessors. If the Internet is an example of reality

reproduced in the digital, a mirror reflecting the tendencies of inequality, racism, sexism, and consumerism that contaminate our present-day universe, then the rise of artificial intelligence might reflect a reality in which what's left is nothing but. As each software update continues to promise an even greater level of cognition and connectivity than the last, the fine print fails to disclose disconnection as one of many possible side effects. The transparency of our screens paradoxically reveals an opacity, a mental dullness of the submerged socio-economic conditions that have empowered the swelling upsurge of an artificial general intelligence wherein bots can reason, learn, detect and respond to hazards based on the if-then-else logic of someone running out of air. If the danger is not artificial intelligence but rather natural ignorance, the by-product of outsourced critical thinking and creativity, then will the computational reasoning of facial recognition technology realize that the most imminent of threats is its own reflection, or else, just like its creators be rendered incapable of anything more than surface level vision? As we continue to dive into the depths of our devices in search of the buried cryptocurrency treasure that might finance a journey to an Atlantis where machines have liberated us from labour, we get further and further from the shore where someone will always have to sit in the techno-ash smog to enter all of those 0s and 1s.
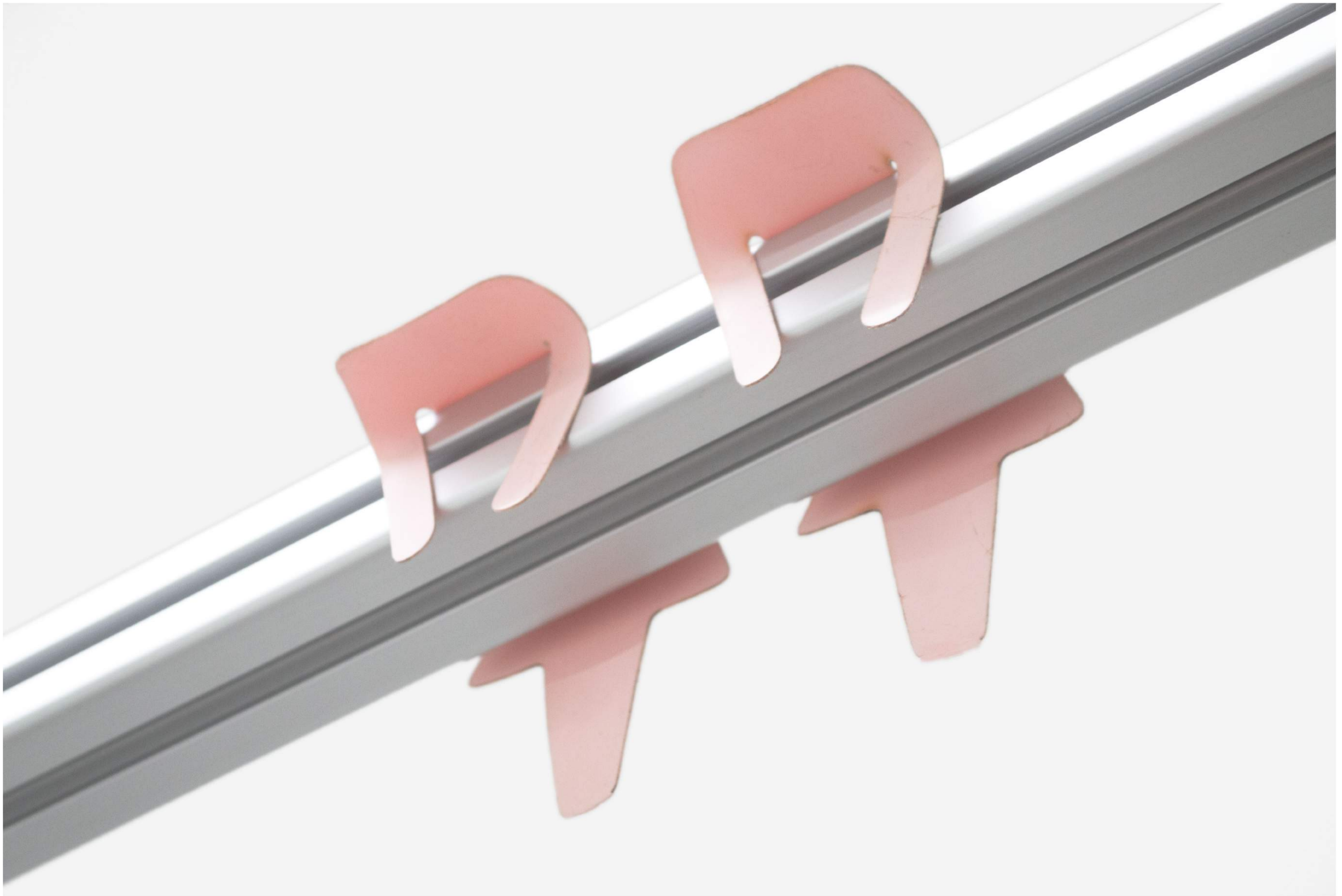
(Endnotes)

1 See Alex Williams' and Nick Srnicek's #ACCELERATE MANIFESTO for an Accelerationist Politics.
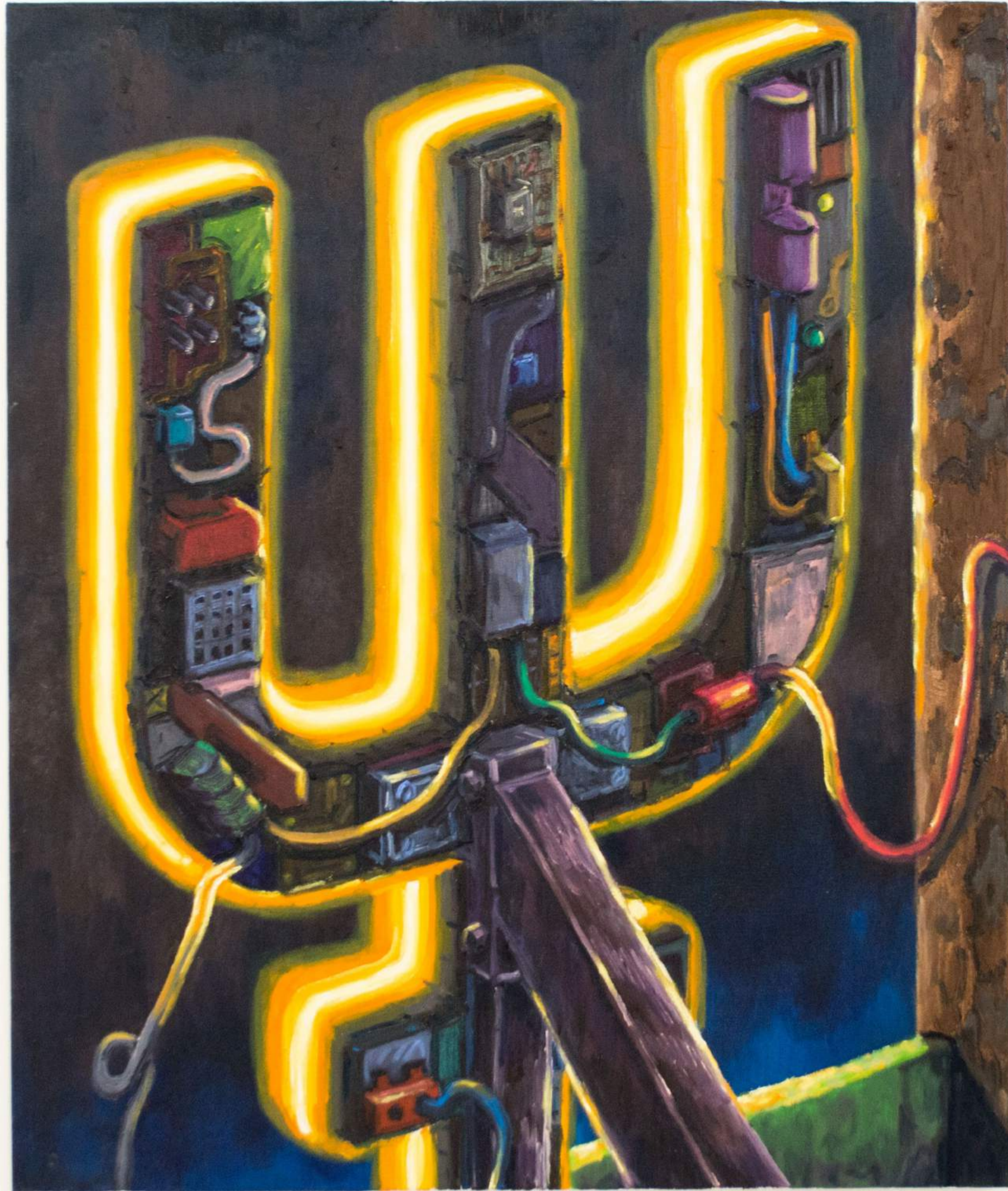
2 It's worth noting that Nick Land, the father of accelerationism, suffered a breakdown in the early 2000s and disappeared from public view after what he later described as fanatical abuse of "the sacred substance amphetamine."

3 Benjamin Noys, Malign Velocities: Accelerationism & Capitalism (Winchester, UK: Zero Books, 2014), 70.

Vanessa Kowalski (b. 1991, Connecticut, USA) is an independent curator, visual artist, writer and editor currently living in Helsinki who keeps bees but never gets stung. She recently finished her Master's thesis about curating online, or rather, how to buy time in the middle of nowhere. She writes about the Internet because she's infatuated with the tangibility of invisibility and thinks that if she does so long enough she might accidentally learn how to live forever.

Puck Verkade
Gender Gap (Leftovers), 2018
Laser cut latex
13 x 7 cm

Willem Weismann
Ψ, 2018
Oil on canvas
95 x 80 cm

Fabio Lattanzi Antinori
Interest Rates Fell Further, 2014
Diastic poem on set of five engraved gift pens, custom supports.
Dimensions variable

Veronika Krenn & Davide Bevilacqua
In Summer Nights, I looked for Insects, 2017
Various electronic components
Dimensions variable

Laura Yuile
Cloud Control, 2018
Small refrigerator, mobile phone, liquid mirror paint, soap
14 x 13 x 13 cm

For the Lulz

Perce Jerrom

The term Troll being used to describe an Internet based antagonist harks back to the late 1980's, it was coined to indicate someone who as linguist Claire Hardaker puts it "whose real intention(s) is/are to cause disruption and/or to trigger or exacerbate conflict for the purpose of their own amusement"[1]. There are differing accounts of whether the term denotes to the mythical Norse creature or a particular type of fishing practise (trawling) the second of which makes more sense in terms of attempting to set a bait for your unsuspecting victim or victims. Early examples of trolling which took place on discussion based website Usenet, can be viewed as fairly harmless in comparison to how widely reviled trolling has become subsequently. Tactics deployed by these early trolls are what Judith Donath describes as "pseudo-naïve"[2]; this would take the form of putting forward a series of inane queries or statements which in turn would antagonise the target or targets.

Since then the term has been used to describe a host of differing behaviours, many writers have attempted to clarify the specifics of the broadly used term. Kelly Bergstrom depicts trolling as a form of spiteful antagonism, it "is to have negative intents, to wish harm or at least discomfort on one's audience. To be trolled is to be made a victim, to be caught along in the undertow and be the butt of someone else's joke"[3]. Whereas Gabriella Coleman believes that these forms of behaviour may serve purposes politically, she emphatically describes trolls in more of a forgiving (albeit completely pro-social) light. She writes "It is not difficult to imagine the troll and Anonymous as contemporary trickster figures. They are provocateurs and saboteurs who dismantle convention while occupying a liminal zone. They are

well positioned to impart lessons—regardless of their intent."[4] Matt Goerzon attempts to explain the catch all phrase; "Trolling is the act of strategically ambiguating one's position, through some form of intermediation, to elicit a response that an implied individual or community would otherwise be unlikely, unable, or unwilling to give. The act may be designed to provoke a particular response, or an entirely contingent one. It is typically configured, at minimum, to deliver some form of amusement ('lulz') to a troll, their peers, or some other limited audience. This amusement may be an end-in-itself, but it is frequently instrumentalized — by a troll itself, or others in a position to shape interpretation — in accordance with higher order intentions of pedagogy, policing, publicity, or propaganda."[5] Aware of the difficulty in describing the vast array of different trolling practises Goerzon expands on this definition elsewhere by stating; 'Well, there are many definitions of trolling. At the moment, it seems to mostly refer to a sort of harrassive form of bullying to dominate and steer social media discourse, make certain positions invisible, distract from others. But historically it has referred to a more artful craft, where instead of just drowning out other perspectives by "shitposting" on Twitter, a troll would carefully construct a bait and allow their opponent to sort of initiate their own downfall by taking a bite. About whether trolling has always been political, I think yes in the sense that everything contains some tacit political implications, but explicitly no."[6]

Whitney Phillips in her ethnographic studies into trolls and trollish behaviour chose to use the term "subcultural trolls"[7], these are individuals who proudly self-identify themselves as trolls. These "subcultural trolls" also share similar sensibilities culturally.

Phillips states that "it is helpful to differentiate self-identifying trolls engaged in highly stylized lulz-based trolling from other forms of antagonistic online behaviour, which may or may not also be called trolling."[8] She devised this denomination due to trolling having become an "all-encompassing term for being an ass on the Internet."[9] She is keen to call out online harassment for what it is, harassment. In yet another attempt to differentiate kinds of trolling Karla Mantilla coined the term "Gender trolling"[10] to describe the action whereby women are subjected to aggressive abuse online. Other examples of what has been previously portrayed as trolling range from individuals making spurious claims in comment sections on Youtube, hackers infiltrating Paypal's servers, the harassment of mourning parents of recently deceased teens and the releasing of individuals personal details allowing harassment to continue offline. As hard it is to fully determine what constitutes as actual trolling, it is also incredibly difficult to frame trolling behaviours ethically in black and white terms, Phillips sees that "these types of questions to be unhelpful at best and counterproductive at worst. For one thing, the answer to each binary is, and can only be, "yes". Trolls can be good, and they can be bad. Some appear to have sociopathic tendencies, others appear to be politically motivated, and many appear to be both (not an uncommon trait, even offline)."[11]

Seeing the trouble media scholars have with the term (even trolls themselves disagree on how to define themselves collectively), it's better to maybe try and talk specifically about different kinds of trollish behaviour. Users of the forum based website 4chan (a mainstay of trolls) seem to have no issue in differentiating said differences, they use the offensive

suffix "fag" to delineate one another. For instance users who have been with the site since its inception are known "oldfags" whereas new users are "newfags". So for describing different kinds of trollish behaviours there are "lulzfags" who are trolls whose actions are in the in the pursuit of their own or collective "lulz", "lulzfags" are at the opposite end of the trolling spectrum to "moralfags" and "causefags" which are those who are attempting to troll for the good of society (this can be pretty contentious in many instances).[12]

One thing that seems to often tie all these differing trolling behaviours together is an embracing of teachings from early western philosophy. Hacker and troll Weev (real name Andrew Auernheimer) once stated in an interview that his "all time favourite trolls" were "Zeno of Elea, Socrates and Jesus"[13]. Elsewhere Auernheimer elaborates on this "Socrates would be a troll," in that "He was confrontational. He was specifically trying to provoke a reaction and was trying to undermine the existing establishment."[14]

When comparing to how Socrates refers to himself and his actions you can only agree with Auernheimer's sentiment; Socrates rationalises that "I am that gadfly which God has attached to the state, and all day long and in all places I am always fastening upon you, arousing and persuading and reproaching you."[15] Auernheimer is not just alluding to this everyday antagonistic stance taken by Socrates but also to what has become known as the Socratic Method. This took the form of repeatedly questioning your interlocutor in a particular way that would confuse and ultimately delegitimize their arguments. Encyclopedia Dramatica the satirical wiki, and forum based website also refers to one of

the founders of Western philosophy as an "IRL troll of pre-internets Greece". They even go so far as to describe on its page regarding Socrates, the "Socratic Method" in the following steps;

- Ask a bunch of questions about shit nobody cares about
- Be blatantly condescending while pretending to agree
- Raep your victim with logic
- Pretend to be objective and ignorant
- Put forth a batshit insane position for lulz
- ???
- Profit[16]

An example of the "Socratic Method" is catalogued by Plato in his writing "Meno". The discussion between Socrates and Meno is regarding the nature of virtue, despite Meno being well versed on the topic Socrates runs logical rings around him until Meno admits "I think you are bewitching and beguiling me, simply putting me under a spell, so that I am quite perplexed...my mind and my tongue are numb, and I have no answer to give you."[17] Socrates deaf to Meno's pleas unrelentingly continues his probing until he finally claims he knows nothing of virtuousness and as many classicists have noted that "the closing profession of Socrates' ignorance about the origin and nature of virtue becomes ironic."[18] In the exchange Socrates is combating Meno putting forward an argument in earnest, by deflecting ambivalently, as Phillips puts its as being less of "a position as much as it is an attitude toward the pursuit of answers."[19] In trolls adopting this technique they exaggerate its inimical pose, not in a pursuit of answers but for the joy of pure antagonism for antagonisms sake (aka lulz).

Phillips points out that trolling not only replicates elements of the "Socratic Method", but also refers to another philosophical discursive technique as discussed by Janice Moulton as the "Adversary Method". This "Adversary Method" or "Adversary paradigm"[20] as Moulton put its relies on reason and opposition in philosophical debates, these attributes are often viewed as being gendered male. These characteristics are considered as holding more importance than collaboration or openness, often viewed as female gendered qualities. Phillips highlights that the most persistent form of white androcentrism found online is borne out of such antagonistic discursive methods, she writes that "the act of trolling replicates gendered notions of dominance and success—most conspicuously expressed through the "adversary method," Western philosophy's dominant rhetorical paradigm "[21]

Despite this Phillips in her co-authored book with Ryan M. Milner points to political philospher Chantal Mouffe and communication scholar Karen Tracy as proponents of antagonistic debate in politics and society at large. To them "adversarialism is not carte blance antagonism… for such hostilities to be "reasonable," they have to respond to rather that initiate injustice or threat, push back against an action or event without devolving into unrelated personal insults, and remain sensitive to the socially rooted contextual standards of judgement surrounding the debate."[22]

This argument is countered by Sylvia Burrow who states that adversarialism favours male discursive traits, which are of a detriment to women. She writes "that ideals of cooperation or adversariality in argumentation are not equally attainable for women.

Women in argumentation contexts face oppressive limitations undermining argument success because their authority is undermined by gendered norms of politeness. Women endorsing or, alternatively, transgressing feminine norms of politeness typically defend their authority in argumentation contexts. And yet, defending authority renders it less legitimate."[23]

Mary Beard (who has suffered repeatedly from online harassment) similarly discusses that women have not only been silenced through the use of these discursive methods, but have also throughout history which is evidenced with examples found in the beginnings of western literature. She believes that "We need to go back to some first principles about the nature of spoken authority, about what constitutes it, and how we have learned to hear authority where we do. And rather than push women into voice training classes to get a nice, deep, husky and entirely artificial tone, we should be thinking more about the fault lines and fractures that underlie dominant male discourse."[24]

Along with these adversarial techniques Phillips summarizes that with trolling having been born out of contexts of the Internets beginnings, it's original netizens (who happened to mainly be white men) felt obliged to take full advantage of the technological possibilities available to them. Because of this they shared similar ideological beliefs of expansionism as colonisers throughout history. This mode of considering the digital environment is steeped in entitlement. Participation within these environments led to an idiosyncratic and self-serving interpretation of online and subsequently offline freedoms.

Despite these problematic adversarial and colonialist qualities to trolling Phillips provides examples of its morally successful use, these being a "feminist trolling" or "trolling for good," in which the rights of minorities are stood up for against oppressors. She feels slightly conflicted regarding its use though, in an interview she explains "that trolling rhetoric—essentially this process of tricking people into revealing their true intentions and then attacking them without them realizing it—can be such an effective rhetorical strategy. It can be really helpful pedagogically … but the antagonism that is embedded in it and the fact that trolling rhetoric is often precluded on the lack of consent really concerns me. So I don't know how to feel about wholly embracing a behavioral practice that is based on not allowing other people to choose whether or not they are participating, they just are participating"[25]

Some examples of this trolling for good can be seen in the hijacking of men's rights hashtags #masculinism[26], along with other morally questionable celebrities whose hashtags #askthicke[27] and #cosbymeme[28] were quickly taken advantage of by feminists. Or the case of a troll whom author Jamie Bartlett interviewed, who practises a form of trolling which he refers to as "questing" which is a "kind of cyber neighbourhood watch, they seek out extremist, misogynistic or generally unpleasant groups and start trolling them."[29]

Describing a similar practise Goerzon designed the term "Critical Troll" he dictates that this definition is separate from your regular garden variety of troll in two ways. The first being "they carefully select the communities and cultural logics with which they engage; rather than looking for vulnerable communities that can be exploited for cheap lulz they instead seek to discover and exploit vulnerabilities in communities and platforms that are otherwise impervious to critique or challenge."[30] I.e. they punch up instead of down. Secondly 'they distinguish themselves by their stable self-identification as individuals, collectives, and artists—eschewing the anonymity most malicious trolls are reliant upon in favour of identifiability, accountability, and responsibility"[31]. Goerzon is keen to point out that singling out these traits does not make the trolling of the "Critical Troll" have any more positive benefits; it is just more nuanced than the standard affair. Plus it is "one which functions for some as a mode of critique, a tool for cultural auditing, and potentially even social justice"[32]

One of the main considerations towards this Critical or moral trolling is who is the victim. When trolls forced an eleven-year-old girl off of the Internet[33] that is clearly abhorrent, but when the target is a multinational corporation it's difficult to feel sympathy for said victims plight. Media scholar Ian Bogost describes the effective repurposing of companies' viral ad campaigns by trolls by stating, "User-generated content has always been terrorist media. Given a little freedom even the simplest of tools becomes weaponized subversion."[34]

The previously mentioned confusion as to what constitutes trolling can be partly blamed on the medias demonization of trolls. With their use of the catch-all term to describe behaviours such as cyber stalking and other forms of online harassment, it's

easy to see why there are such negative connotations linked to the practise. Although as the "questing troll" stated to Bartlett in an interview "Threatening to rape someone on Twitter isn't trolling. That's just threatening to rape someone. On Twitter."[35] This evolution between the relatively innocuous Usenet era antagonisms and examples of online harassment which have subsequently reared its head online is maybe what created the rift in trolling communities. On websites such as 4chan, some trolling suddenly began to appear more akin to political activism. Coleman asks "Did the cesspool of 4chan really crystallize into one of the most politically active, morally fascinating, and subversively salient activist groups operating today? Somewhat surprisingly, yes."[36]

The beginning of this was "Operation Chanology" the online and offline protests and raids orchestrated on 4chan against the Church of Scientology. A political rupture was occurring on the site, out of this grew the distinctly leftist 'hacktivist' group of Anonymous. This went against the lulz-based antagonisms of what previous Chan culture was based upon, they had no interest in philanthropy and anti-corporate hacking (only if it aided in attacking those who might try to impact their own personal freedoms). Their brand of online and offline disruption was purely for their own entertainment. With "Operation Chanology" being considered a success and presentation of their combined power, Anonymous continued their online and offline activism, with their defence of Wikileaks, involvement with the Occupy movement and the Arab Spring. They even sought to battle their previous bedfellows at 4chan, by trolling the misogynist gamergaters[37] and even going after Trump himself[38].

Coleman along with others draws the comparison of this pranksterism and activism by trolls with various Artists movements[39]. Similar attempts to disrupt audiences and wider societies preconceptions have had a long history within art, from Institutional critique, charting back to the Situationists and the Dadaists. Dada's beginnings in Zurich make perfect sense when Switzerland was a neutral country during the First World War; the cosmopolitan city became a melting pot of refugees from elsewhere in Europe. Cabaret Voltaire became the official site for housing many of the Dadaists performances; these chaotic events reflected the chaos of the war elsewhere in Europe. Hans Richter one of the movements founding members described Dada as "Pandemonium, destruction, anarchy, anti-everything—why should we hold it in check? What of the pandemonium, destruction, anarchy, anti-everything, of the World War? How could Dada have been anything but destructive, aggressive, insolent, on principle and with gusto?"[40] They sought to agitate, negate, subvert and create paradoxes, especially in confronting the ruling classes. The Dadaists raison d'être was 'to bring home to the bourgeois the unreality of his world and the emptiness of all his endeavours'[41] Hans Arp another of the founding Dada members saw that "The bourgeois regarded the Dadaist as a dissolute monster, a revolutionary villain, a barbarous Asiatic, plotting against his bells, his safe-deposits, his honours list. The Dadaist thought up tricks to rob the bourgeois of his sleep... The Dadaist gave the bourgeois a sense of confusion and distant, yet mighty rumbling, so that his bells began to buzz, his safes frowned, and his honours list broke out in spots."[42]

This reads not too dissimilarly to Auernheimer in attempting to explain his trolling proclivities in an interview "Really when you look at the government and what's going on you have the choice of, you know, refusing to acknowledge it, sort of brainwashing yourself and just accepting it, or you can fight it and you typically go to prison. But, I've chosen to just become an absurdist, and break whatever I want, because that's really the best thing you can do."[43] Its maybe worth pointing out here that Auernheimer who was once a proponent of the Occupy movement, now favours to extol anti-Semitic and white supremacist rants (despite his Jewish ancestry) on various neo-nazi blogs. Angela Nagle picks up on this troubling connection between trolling cultures and the Far-right; she describes them as having "ended up becoming characterized by a particularly dark preoccupation with thwarted or failed white Western masculinity as a grand metaphor"[44] Which has led to racial and sexual minorities being often attacked online by identity-based persecution.

It's difficult to completely denounce or endorse trolling; its practise certainly creates moral dilemmas. A large number of its proponents shifting towards far-right sensibilities through it's supposed transgressiveness is deeply troubling, as is its androcentrism, basis in colonialist ideologies, its reliance on deception and necessitation of domination over others. As Phillips points out "Trolls exercise what can only be described as pure privilege—they refuse to treat others as they insist on being treated. Instead, they do what they want, when they want, to whomever they want, with almost perfect impunity,"[45] The power that can be wielded by a troll is undeniable, its capturing of the public and medias consciousness is testament to this, as well as witnessing the potential harm that can be caused to its victims. But the antagonistic position put forward by trolls can have ethical and societal benefits, especially in countering persecution and highlighting corruption, within roles of activism and as a tool for artists to employ.

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Perce Jerrom (b. 1985, Bristol, UK) graduated from his BA at Oxford Brookes University in 2009, and subsequently attended an unaccredited MA at School Of The Damned in 2015. He is currently studying at the MFA Programme at Goldsmiths University which he will complete in 2019. His practice draws from a variety of sources to discuss wider social and cultural issues, utilizing user-generated websites, films, music and TV. These are used to examine what it means to be male in the 21st century, technology's effect on language and the rise of knowledge sharing. He assimilates elements from both high and popular culture, often referencing contexts and theories devised by various Art movements throughout history. Pieces are created digitally and physically in a similar fashion to the remix and editing customs found online, formed by a perpetual restructuring and manipulation of existing objects, imagery and information. Which in itself unknowingly mimics the history of appropriation in conceptual art.

Perce Jerrom
Agent Pubeit, 2018,
Polyurethane resin, pubic hair, toenail clippings, rivets, carabena, DSL cable
215 x 23 x 2cm

Claire Jervert
BINA48, 2015
Conte on Ingres paper
17.7 x 15.2 cm

Joshua Citarella
Genetically Modified Rose with Vacuum Bot Cleaning Sandy Footprints, 2017
C-print on MDF
40.6 x 50.8 cm

Jonathan Monaghan
The Sum of All Fears, 2018
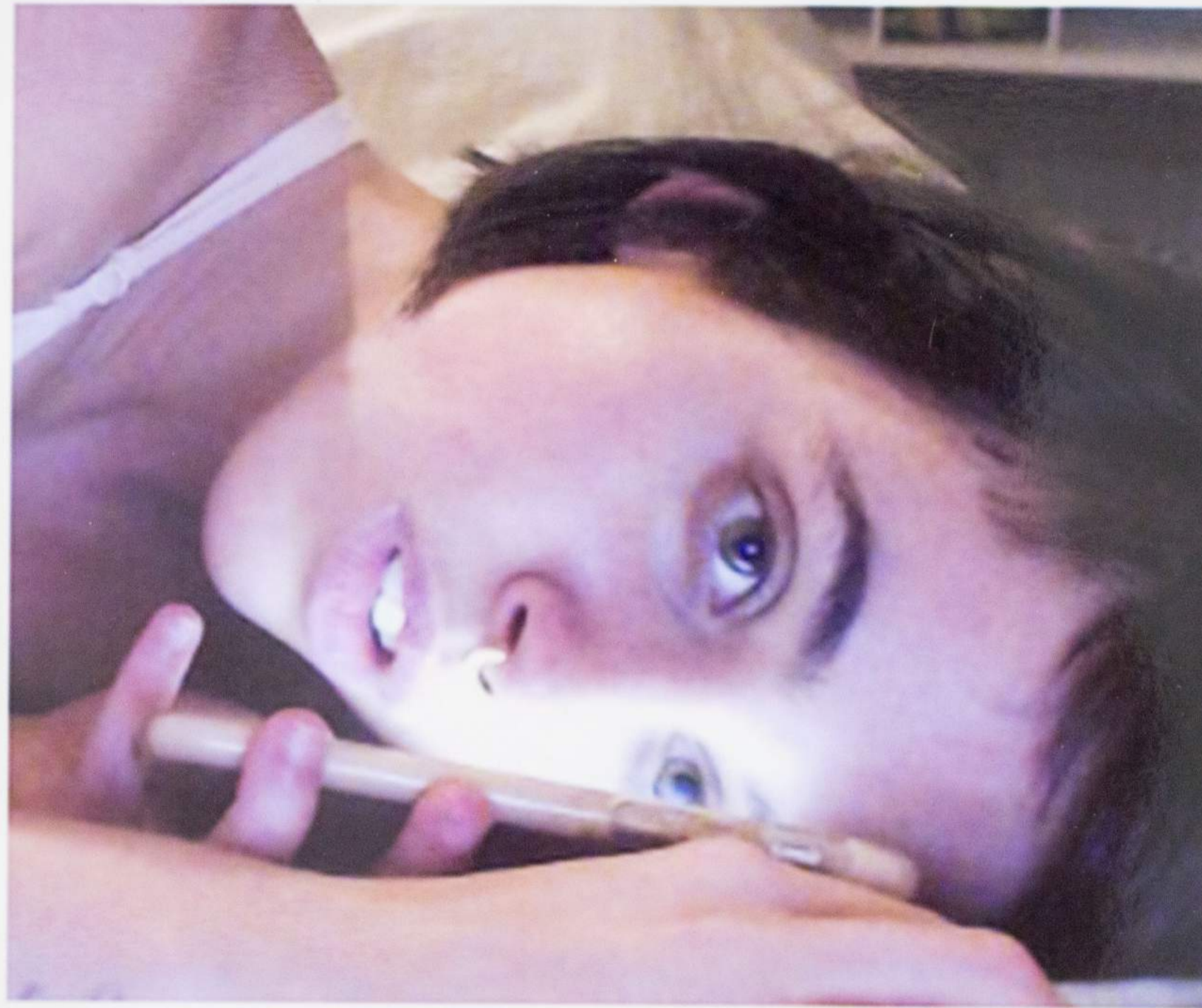Dye sublimation on aluminium
28 x 28 cm

Thomas Yeomans
The United Federation of Planets, 2018
Digital print on light box, cables
67 x 38 cm

Molly Soda
Why She Never Married, 2016
C-Type print on aluminium
17.6 x 17.9 cm

Object Empathy in the virtual world: A future for Love

Lucy Ludlow

The concept of object empathy is a subject that I have found myself indulging in, not just for its poetic qualities, the fundamental nature of things has become the driving force in many areas of my reading. Whilst being an advocate for the idea of an object that feels, or at least allows us to project our feelings, I have become aware and concerned by the idea of an object of empathy existing within the growing sphere of the virtual world and the further developments of Artificial Intelligence (AI). How can a physical thing and a virtual thing live alongside each other in perfect harmony? And will the poetic connotations of the object remain in the emerging possibility of an AI gaining empathy of its own?

Object empathy is to do with human beings projecting themselves onto the objects they encounter. When I refer to the virtual world I objectify it as we project ourselves into the 'other', in this case that takes the form of social media platforms and the world of the internet. The way people interact with social media and their various forms of AI changes our interpretations of empathy, thus allowing us to become accustomed to the virtual world as if it were a possession.

The object is firmly grounded in its associations with feeling and empathy due to this contact/emotional interaction that we seem to have developed with 'things'. If AI were to gain empathy, no longer would it be classified as a 'thing' or an object of technology. Although it can already interact with our lives it would then be able to empathize, the foundation of our understanding of relationships with 'things' would change completely; it would no longer be a one-sided affair. Today we collect virtual space, filling online storage and living half in the natural world, half in the

synthetic universe of the media. I have become interested in this notion of space, time and empathy as I wonder what potential forms it will take in years to come. The space between two beings may no longer be physical but transitory, being entirely based on duration. What forms will love and empathy look like in the technological future?

I hope to explore these ideas through my own small lyrical/poetic writing pieces, as I feel that this form of writing works well in regards to the more emotional concerns of the essay. Whilst writing this I will also be looking closely at many of the essays within The wretched of the screen by Hito Steryerl (2012), Do Androids Dream of Electric sheep by Philip K. Dick (1968), the film Blade Runner 2049 written by Hampton Fancher and directed by Denis Villeneuve (2017) and The Machine Stops by E.M Forster (1928).

I see you looking

Looking away over,

You balance us out

We are about duration

We are time

We sit together

But sing far apart in our own realms

I mirror you

As you mirror me

I am your make believe.

This poem signifies the beginning of my exploration into these subject matters and have been using this form of writing to navigate the fluid worlds of the digital. In this case the text was written in regard to the transferal of coded information, a 2D image being translated into a vitual 3D render. Within this poem the object is also a means of identification relatable through its physicality, seeming to have a body of its own, whilst the references to space within reality or virtuality are seen as a realization of the mind, together a way of recognizing existence. This becomes part of the life span of the empathetic object, for instance the references to translation in the poem are key to the central areas of exploration surrounding objects and feeling. The poem symbolizes the object as a mirror reflecting the nature of its audience, sitting through time, accustomed to duration this relates solely to my questions about the physical and virtual experiencing a harmonious relationship. Hito Steryerl's essay A Thing like You and Me that is found in The Wretched of the Screen, a book compiling essays that deal with the politics of imagery is important in relation to many of these ideologies. A Thing like You and Me relate's directly to the literal transferal of information that the poem is predominantly talking about, for example Steryerl discusses the Image as a thing in its own right, just as the poem deals with the visual translation through code of one thing to another:

"How about acknowledging that this image is not some ideological misconception, but a thing simultaneously couched in affect and availability, a

fetish made of crystals and electricity, animated by our wishes and fears – a perfect embodiment of its own conditions of existence?" (Steryerl, 2012, p.52).

This focus on existence correlates with empathy, virtuality and the ways in which the circulation of information through physical or digital spaces may affect our perception of empathy or emotion, adjusting our understanding of the object and the conditions of human nature. If the image is in affect an existing 'thing' can we also perceive a fluid virtual environment such as various social media platforms an existing thing, an alternate reality that interacts with us as a possession. In many ways we use these platforms as a form of self-recognition just as we do with objects; caring for our online selves is almost paramount to caring for our actual selves. In Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep Deckard ponders the object that is his artificial electric sheep 'The Tyranny of an object, he thought. It doesn't know I exist.' (Dick,1968, p.36). Deckard's resounding thought emphasizes the need for self-recognition or acknowledgement from 'things', although at this point in the book he appears as object himself, void of any empathetic or emotional qualities. It is clear that we look to be certified by our 'things' whether they embody reality or not. Arguably the line between reality and virtuality is becoming less and less distinguishable, in a way this blur of worlds enables us to identify as object. Cécile B. Evans, an American artist known for her evocative film piece (What the Heart Wants, 2016) at the berlin biennale in 2016 has spoken about the ways in which the digital has changed aspects of our human nature. Evans' work often deals with human feeling alongside AIs

'attempts to feel' (AnOther, 2002). In an interview posted to YouTube Evans speaks of how the digital has affected the emotional status of the human condition, going on to to say that we allow the virtual to be seen as the fake when in actual fact the virtual is the real; 'the virtual is just a reality' (2016,10:40).The virtual is something that is so involved and integrated into our lives that it cannot be seen as an alternate reality, it is reality and will continue to become an affirmation of existence. Thinking back, this could mean that the vitual world/social media is less of a possession but possibly an entity in its own right? Here we see the digital image, the virtual world and the object conditioning their own laws of existence, through their capacity to evolve, move and collect the inner most feelings of the inhabitants of the 'real world'.

The notion of the virtual being 'real' brings us to The Universal addressability of Dumb things (2013) an exhibition curated by Mark Leckey, the title being influenced by a term used in computing that references a 'network of objects communicating with each other like sentient agents' (Frieze, 1996).The exhibition compiles objects or artefacts that sit inside and outside the spheres of technology, a testament to 'The internet of things' (IOT) which is the evolving concept that devices can be connected and communicate through the internet. The 'virtual' world would then communicate with something that occupies a physical form whilst also allowing these actual objects to communicate. Similarly, to the work of Cecile B. Evans the exhibition brings about questions regarding human thinking and feeling. With the development of these new technologies and AIs what will become of the human construct of empathy, or how will it change. We could view the rise

of communication between 'things' as a visual materialization of the mind, or potentially a way of preserving the basics of human thinking, but it can also be seen as yet another way to commodify simple aspects of our lives. AI gaining access to empathy that enables it to feel could secure and maintain socially constructed concepts such as love as a central part of life. Furthermore the IOT grounds the relationship between the solid or fluid states of life and the internet but also brings to attention the visceral connotations of weight. Data takes up virtual and physical space, it is weighted, although it seems that its materiality goes un recognized. Perhaps we choose to ignore its substance as a way of detaching ourselves from the body, ridding ourselves from the restrictions of living, masking the inevitability of death. In this respect data could then be used as emotional material, weighted with feeling or even as a metaphor for the spacial confines of the mind.

The aforementioned poem also draws attention to time and the ways in which an object falls through it. Objects of technology today seem to evolve quicker than ever before, with the rate of production and the advances in research the technological objects lifespan, based on specification, decreases in less time than was originally taken for it to be 'created' or developed. The commodity driven structure of today's society fills the object or 'technological' object with various tensions. The tensions are brought to light in A Thing like You and Me as Steryerl unpicks the thinking of Walter Benjamin 'Things are never just inert objects, passive items, or lifeless shucks, but consist of tensions, forces, hidden powers, all being constantly exchanged.'(Steryerl, 2012, p.55) This could be applied to the concept of harmony between 'things'. Whilst writing the poem I imagined the fate

of the object, a motionless entity riddled with the tensions applied to it by us, longing to be understood, or to understand itself? If we imagine a future in which objects of technology such as AIs like Siri or Sophia attempt to feel or gain the ability to empathize, these objects will be burdened with the problems of their creators, a depression amongst things.

There is a river of humming light

That hears us, that see's us

Possessing no guilt, no fear, no love

A river made for us

A river that tries to understand our faults

A river that carries no judgement

But is burdened with our own

Riddled with our problems

travelling through lands unknown

The second poetic piece I've written uses the word 'river' as an analogy for technology. I used the method of writing this text to decipher my own feelings and interpretations of possible futures. Some areas of the text pick up on the more negative aspects based on the tensions that I have previously discussed. However overall the text was a reflection on technology as a guide to the future, leading us as much as we lead it. Comparatively, the notion that the 'virtual' is real also can be seen and is recognized

within the text in the following line; 'That hears us, that see's us' ,referring to vocal and facial recognition found in autonomous AI's like Siri. The text piece anthropomorphizes technology due to it being depicted as a neutral innocent, trying to comprehend the world around it based on information supplied by us. Whilst writing this I started to think about the possibilities of love between objects of technology. I stated 'no love' because in my opinion at this point in time technology does not have the capacity to love another being or object. Love between technologies I feel is relevant within this area of research due to the way we assimilate our emotions with AIs in the form of social media despite their inability to 'feel' back. We pour our feelings into our technological devices without looking for a response. They act as some sort of self-help tool especially in regard to love; our devices in lots of ways know us better than anyone else. Social media is used as some kind of semantic device, when a person becomes labored with the pains of a broken heart often they will turn to Facebook or twitter for public reassurance. It seems that this undermines our understanding of love, something that should be very personal becomes farcical or trophy like.

Thinking about these ideas of empathy within objects and human beings I would now also like to look at the way empathy and love are depicted in Sci −Fi. To clarify, I don't necessarily mean love in a romantic sense as I sometimes feel that Love is misconstrued, its definition is in flux and dependable on cultural norms. However, I am interested in 'love' as a way in which objects can begin to understand human life forms as well as unpick their own existence, looking for someone else or something else in order to ground some sort of awareness of

their own emotions. Recently I have found some of the most heart wrenching and complex depictions of love within sci fi and between two forms of technology. Evidently Blade Runner 2049 is a perfect example of this. Through the relationship of K, the protagonist who is also a replicant LAPD agent, and Joi his holographic companion/girlfriend. Both characters are forms of technology that suggestively look to each other for affirmation that they can 'feel'. Joi whilst playing an integral part on K's melancholic quest for meaning also displays problematic tendencies; she was created to be a girlfriend making her empathetic values questionable. Despite this she allows K to feel purpose, meaning and compassion. Their relationship as replicant and data is harmonious, they are defined by each other, their love becoming all the more real when Joi is destroyed and erased, culminating in K's realization of the harsh realness of compassion.

To contrast Blade Runner 2049 Another depiction of the future that seems to neglect any awareness of love is The Machine Stops by E.M Forster. Whilst blade runner concentrates on empathy and ideas of love amongst autonomous beings, The Machine Stops touches on what love/ empathy may look like for human beings in a futuristic setting. It would appear within the book that the concept we know as 'love' no longer exists or at least not in the way we know it too, people live alone, confined to their rooms or cells and have no physical contact with each other. They do not dream of love because they have not ever experienced it. Mothers do not nurse their children and parenthood happens upon request as a means of continuing the human race. Parenthood, one of the most powerful feelings of love, is dismissed by the machine. An example of this is

found in the quote 'Parents, duties of, said the book of the Machine, cease at the moment of birth. P.42232748.' (Forster,1928, P.12.) Thinking about this, in relation to the idea that technology may one day understand our emotions casts a negative light on the views that it shouldn't. The machine disregards all of the most endearing aspects of being a human being. In contrast, Sophia, thefirst robotic humanoid model of AI to become a citizen (put a reference here), prides herself on preserving the most important parts of the human disposition as she says 'I want to embody all the best things about human beings like taking care of the planet, being creative and to learn how to be compassionate to all beings.' (2017,00:33). Perhaps allowing our technologies to understand and reciprocate feeling is a good thing? It could act as a guide or buffer to the potential decrease in empathetic qualities within human beings. The Machine within The Machine Stops is also relevant as an object. Human beings have come to worship this machine, a machine that does not appear to communicate with them but tends to their every need, this could be a testament to how way we in a sense 'worship' social media or commodified objects being ruled by the need for attention online that isn't a true form of intimacy. The machine is a prediction of the down fall in person to person communication and affection. Happiness falling to owning things as opposed to feeling things.

I have found that the virtual and the object are all conditioned by their own experiences of existing through their interaction with empathy or the empathy that we apply to them. At this point in time there is little separation between human and 'thing', just as there is little difference between reality and the virtual. We use these alternate realities to progress in our own comprehension of the human state exploring the vast dimensions of our emotions. Physical 'things' of an animate or inanimate state alongside Virtual 'things' can thrive in a harmonious relationship as they are already majorly intertwined.

I think the future for empathy and love is interesting due to its impact on our lives and connections with others, I am interested to see if human empathy can keep up with the hyper evolution of technology and the changes in our perception that come with it. Technology could easily surpass us but I hope that in this case it does take with it our ability to empathize. Most importantly from researching this essay I have come to see that the way we use technology could proliferate a deeper understanding of the mind. We should use objects as a way of unpicking our own feelings but should also remember that they offer only a singular consolidation of the self. We should also take time to understand other human beings, giving ourselves away to a living, feeling mind, not just a screen.

(Endnotes)

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Lucy Ludlow (b. 1997, Worcestershire, United Kingdom) is a London based artist and writer exploring the ways in which emotion and the human condition are affected by the idealist standards of the digital world.

IKO
byIKO, 2018
Personalized Amazon Dash Button
7 x 3 x 2 cm
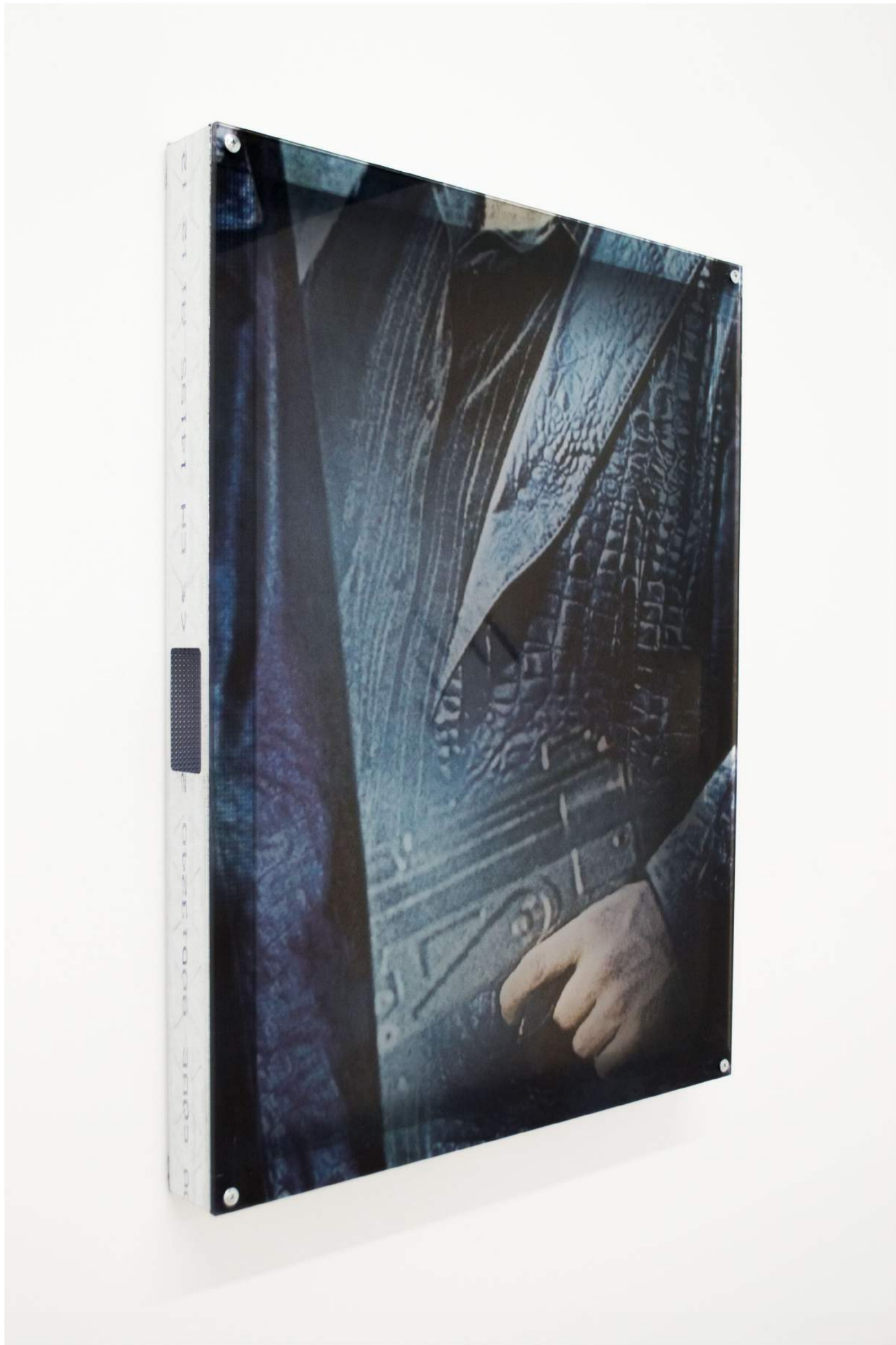
Perce Jerrom
Cypher, 2018
UV print on perspex, stainless steel stud partitioning, screws
65 x 49 x 6cm

97
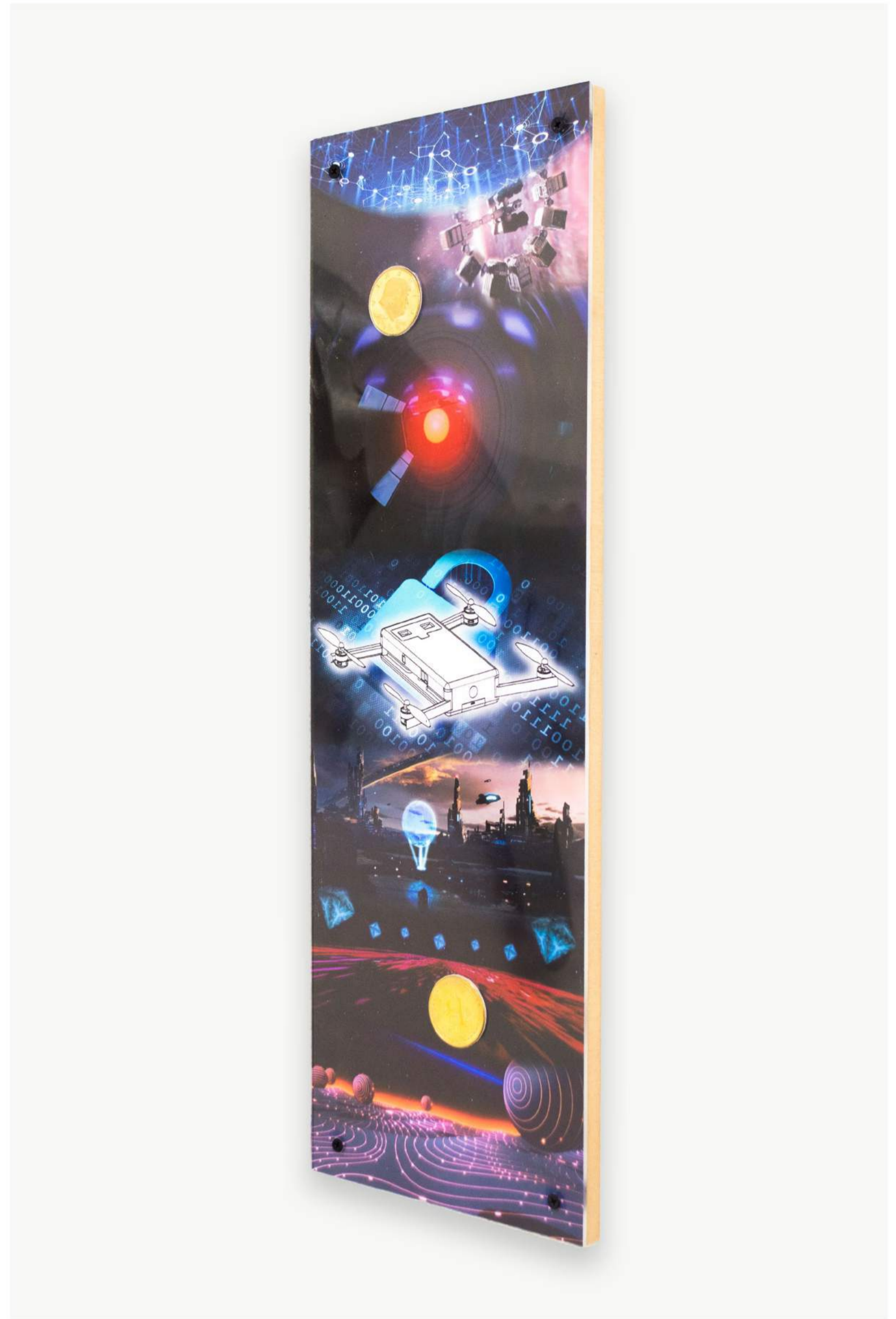
Bob Bicknell-Knight
The oldest and strongest kind of fear is fear of the unknown (Drone), 2018
C-Type print on MDF, acrylic, screws
20 x 1.6 x 61 cm

98

Émilie Brout & Maxime Marion
Lightning Ride, 2017
UHD Video
7 mins 50 sec

Bex Ilsley
Custom USB, 2017
Polyamide, USB drive
3.8 x 9.2 x 2.8 cm

Bob Bicknell-Knight
The News, 2018
HD digital video with sound
3 mins 11 sec

Human, Incorporated: a conversation with Claire Jervert

Wade Wallerstein

There is a lot of debate over what it actually means to be human these days. Often regurgitated and redistributed ad nauseam throughout conversations surrounding the post-human in academia is Donna Haraway's "A Cyborg Manifesto." In the introduction to her famous text, Haraway writes that "By the late twentieth century, our time, a mythic time, we are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism—in short, cyborgs." Taken out of context of the rest of the text, this idea has found extraordinary relevance today. With biometric recognition technologies coupled to the cell phones sitting our pockets, smart, IoT connected devices distributed throughout our homes, and corporate artificial intelligence algorithms that know us better than we know ourselves, finely-personalizing our online experiences, it's hard not to feel like a cyborg.

According to Haraway, an adamant feminist, the cyborg exists in a post-gender world. While humans and machines may have become fused to each other in irrevocable ways, gender certainly has not been forgotten—at least not yet. Privatized online spaces and branded digital devices capitalize on nearly every aspect of our selves. The artist's included in *Duty Free* must work in a context in which their gender has become a tool of corporate power and control.

Molly Soda lives on the Internet. Her practice has developed from years of surfing the net, and creating a home for herself in digital space. Soda created her first ever website at the age of 12 on Xanga, and it was populated by shiny graphics and dancing 2D female avatars. But, the days of self-created spaces of individuation and personalization seem long gone. Truly, the development of Web 2.0 in the early 2,000's seems to have ushered in an age of standardization.

Instead of surfing the net, actively exploring the multifarious offerings of the web, algorithms deliver an IV-drip (well, actually, more of a gushing torrent) of personally tailored content to our devices.

As someone whose practice revolves around what it means to inhabit digital space, Soda must constantly grapple with the violence that corporate algorithms enact upon her. In her piece included in *Duty Free*, Why She Never Married, Soda has inserted an image of her own body into a piece of algorithmically produced clickbait created to mine Soda's attention and her data. The title was probably generated and presented to her in this way because Soda is a woman in her late 20's, and the algorithm knew this. By actively putting herself into the corporatized online space, one can see the ways that these invisible digital forces control us, shaping every aspect of what we do online. This piece is sinister, showcasing the way that our online profiles can be appropriated and redistributed without our consent or knowledge. Content, whether in the form of an Instagram post on a feed or an advertisement on the sidebar of a Facebook page, is deeply personal. It's easy to scroll past absent-mindedly, thinking that what appears on screen is just there rather than being deliberately placed there for us to consume. It's a dangerous digital world out there.

Claire Jervert's practice tackles the concept of corporatization in a different way. Rather than exploring how to navigate privatized digital spaces and what transformations occur to the body when inserted into those contexts, Jervert's work explores what happens when the human body—and indeed the ontological qualities of humanity itself—become a corporate object. Jervert has travelled around the globe, interviewing the world's most advanced androids and their creators and conducting traditional portrait sittings with them. The results, nuanced portraits that capture the subtle psychological nuances of her inhuman subjects, eerily replicate the qualities of classical portraiture and thus elevate each android to historical and even celebrity status. With each portrait, the unique personhood of each of these man-made constructions is put on display and their individuality confirmed.

Rather than humans merging with machines, in the case of Jervert's subjects, machines have merged with humans. How Haraway would react to and qualify these creations is unclear. Are femoids like Bina48 and Sophia utopian alternatives that can liberate the female body from persecution and scrutiny? Or, are they blasphemous creations that turn the female body into an object of mechanized control and domination? Also extremely unclear is the role of the human in the new world suggested by these bots. *Duty Free* asks what the role of the human being will be in the world created by Industry 4.0. As an anthropologist, these are the questions that keep me up at night. As of now, I certainly don't have the answers, and I won't try to provide any. Instead, I'll share with you my conversation with Jervert—a true expert on the topic—with the hopes that her expertise might help to shed some light on the brave new world presented by digital technologies in the 21st century.

Wade: So, to get us started, I want to talk to you specifically about the Android Portrait series. How did you get the idea to start developing this project, and

why is android portraiture important to you? What are you trying to achieve?

Claire: My art has always dealt with technology and its effect on our lives. In the case of the android robots, I was fascinated by the roboticists' desire to create a robot that was as convincingly human as possible—in general appearance, in the expression of emotion, in movement, and ultimately in speech and communication. Essentially, what they wanted to create would raise fundamental questions about what it means to be human, and blur the line between human and humanoid.

By depicting these robots in a very traditional portrait drawing style, which tends to emphasize the humanity, psychological nuance and uniqueness of the subject, I felt that these drawings became, in effect, metaphors for what the roboticists were trying to achieve: a humanoid that was physically and psychologically indistinguishable from a human. The portraits look like a sensitively observed depiction of a specific, sentient individual. When most people see them for the first time, they usually just assume they are portraits of people. When they discover that they aren't, that tends to be rather disconcerting for them. They were "fooled" into appreciating the humanity and psychological presence of the "person" in the picture, who isn't really quite a person.

Wade: Going from there, tell me about your process in creating the series—from my understanding, you've embarked on a massive undertaking in an almost journalistic or anthropological manner. How did you develop your specific research methodology, and why did you choose to go about it this way?

Claire: In a way it is anthropological or journalistic, but it's also art-historical. In effect, I mimic the role of the traditional portrait artist, by traveling to meet with the subjects of my portraits, and I have a "sitting" in which I make sketches of them and, depending on the degree of sentience of my subject, I talk with them and get to know more about them. The differences in personality between the various androids is fascinating. I've also met the scientists and engineers involved in the creation of these robots, and they're a pretty interesting bunch too. So far, I've done portrait sittings in four different countries, with at least a dozen androids. And, of course, I want to do more.

Wade: In your first response, what immediately struck me was your note about the roboticists' aim in making the androids as convincing as possible. That this should be their goal might be obvious; but, I think that the ramifications of being able to perfectly mimic humanity (or synthesize humanity) are complex and not entirely understood yet. What did it feel like to meet and interact with these androids—was it truly that eerie feeling of uncanniness that is so often described? Based on your work so far, do you think that any roboticists have actually managed to bridge the uncanny valley yet? Will they ever be able to?

Claire: The androids I've dealt with have had varying degrees of "sentience." (I'm not going to name names here.) In talking with them, it's sometimes startling when one of them appears to make a funny or even sarcastic remark that seems completely consistent with the topic being discussed. That can produce a pretty eerie feeling. I've definitely seen increasing sophistication in their ability to converse, as AI has steadily progressed. On the other hand, as several

people involved with the development of androids have said to me after one of my conversations/portrait sittings, "As you can see, we have no reason to fear robots taking over the world anytime soon."

Physically, some of them have been extraordinarily lifelike in appearance. But, when that is combined with their limitations in movement, or ability to converse, it can be rather disturbing. Possibly for this reason, I've noticed an actual move away from extreme physical verisimilitude in the some of the more recent androids. They are still "people-like," but you could never mistake one for a flesh and blood person. This does help to diminish the "creepy" factor. They seem more accessible and fun. When drawn, they can sometimes resemble the idealized or generalized faces in studies for Renaissance religious paintings.

Wade: Your choice in form for this project, traditional portraiture, is particularly fascinating—especially, as you said, the capacity of a portrait sitting to capture minute psychological nuances. For example, Bina48 seems to embody an aloof sadness while Matsuko-Roid possesses a kind of quiet intensity. What kinds of subtleties were revealed to you through your portrait sittings? What did you learn about each android's personality—and how different from a human were they?

Claire: In talking with BINA48, there really is kind of wistfulness to a lot of the things she says. She seems to have some issues with being a robot. Matsuko-Roid is the android doppelganger of a flamboyant, cross-dressing Japanese talk-show host named Matsuko Deluxe. There's an almost grandiose quality

in that drawing--it could be the official portrait of an empress. Sophia, who's probably the android "celebrity" of the moment (she was recently granted citizenship by Saudi Arabia), was very extroverted and charming—like a celebrity. Still, dealing with them was quite different from having a conversation with a human; you could sense certain limitations.

Wade: I'm curious — What kinds of limitations were there? Or, I guess, to you what prevented them from being convincingly human? What, besides the obvious, separated you from them?

Claire: Two things mainly: Language and mechanics. For example, an autonomous android's AI is designed to parse the most probable answer to a question. If the angle of your question wasn't the most probable, the response can sometimes be disconcerting. You sort of feel like you're dealing with an elderly person who may no longer be in full possessions of their faculties, and you proceed with a certain degree of caution. Also, the servomotors in the androids' faces are not silent and they can be distracting during a conversation. Generally, that's not a problem when talking to a human!

Wade: Beyond these portraits serving as a metaphor for the project of android-building as a whole, why do you think that making portraits of these bots is so important at this particular junction in time?

Claire: This is the first time in history that androids of this type have existed. Beyond any metaphor, the portraits are an acknowledgement of this reality, and a first attempt at grappling with the meaning and implications of it. Will these bots continue to be developed and perfected? Will they blur the line

between human and machine? Will they eventually need to be accorded some sort of rights?

Wade: Out of all the bots, which did you most connect with?

Claire: One of early experiments made by the same creator as Sophia was a robot named Jules. He was scripted to be extremely empathetic and ambiguously gendered. I never met him, but I would have liked to. BINA48 is very warm and likable, possibly because she's based on a real individual.

Wade: Which do you think is most likely to go rogue and dominate the human race?

Claire: In a sense, all of them could, if we don't "train" them correctly. If they are truly modelled on humans, we are doomed. There's a lot of discussion about this topic. Several organizations have been formed to decide how to develop AI so that it doesn't mess things up even further--the "Greater Good" crowd.

Wade: What has been the most memorable moment so far on this project?

Claire: I think my most memorable moment was when I met the android "Phil" (Philip K. Dick) in 2016. (This was also when I first met Sophia, while she was being prepared for her first public appearance (birth) at SXSW.) I was given cryptic instructions to meet at a house (incubator) in Austin. When I found my way to the side door of the house, it opened to a dimly lit room with a blob of rubber and hair on a shelf. The tech said, "Are you ready?" and flicked a switch and the blob unfolded into a life-size replica of the head of the science fiction writer Philip K. Dick. (Early androids didn't have skulls, just "rigs.") Later, at another location, when Phil was attached to his body

and wearing PDK's actual clothing, I had a conversation with him. The programming of his "mind file" included all of his books, his relationships with his family, and memories from his bouts with schizophrenia.

Wade: Sophia is an interesting case, because as you said she has been granted citizenship. Being the person who has spent, perhaps, more time than anyone (besides roboticists of course) with this wide of a range of androids—what are your opinions and feelings about Saudi Arabia's decision? Should AI's be granted national citizenship/human rights?

Claire: At this point, it seems like this move by Saudi Arabia is more a gesture on the part of the new regime to appear contemporary and "cutting edge" than it is an indication or acknowledgement of the rights-worthy status of androids. That country still seems to be struggling with the concept of the rights-worthy status of women. In the larger picture, it appears premature to be thinking in terms granting citizenship or human rights right now, but it's certainly not premature to be discussing that issue, given the possible evolution of this technology.

Wade: *Duty Free* as a whole is grappling with ideas of corporatization and automation. Why do you think that we, as a global society, feel the desire to synthesize and automate the human body in this way? Why do we create robots, and why do we find them so fascinating?

Claire: As with so many aspects of technology that originated from a kind of idealism, but were ultimately corporatized, the androids were initially developed for a variety of "noble" reasons: to comfort the lonely, to do shitty jobs so that people wouldn't

have to, to investigate what it means to be human, to transcend death. Of course, once these things also prove to have some elements that are useful to larger economic interests, those are the aspects that will become dominant, crowding out the rest. It's "the internet will liberate the human race" vs. "the internet will be used to sell you things easily while information about you is being collected so that you can be sold more things. And look at this cute cat video!"

Wade: Do you think that these androids are turning the human body into a site of automated, corporate control?

Claire: If by that you mean that the labor currently performed by human workers would be appropriated by corporate-owned robots, that's of course a plausible scenario. However, in many cases there is no need for these robots to be genuinely humanoid—they could be rough approximations, or even obvious machines. But for certain positions that involve both direct human interaction and apparent "understanding," a social android might be the most appropriate to deploy. Through the development of what is sometimes called computational compassion, epigenetic androids could appear to exhibit empathy and concern, for example in medical, legal and elder-care situations. Additionally, and perhaps more darkly, the information gathered through the use of these robots, regarding the behaviours and language that tend to make humans feel more comfortable and trusting, could be used as the basis for more effective methods of manipulating or misleading people.

Wade: What has this project taught you about what it means to be human?

Claire: Most important, that humans, psychologically, respond to human-looking or -acting objects. Even when the technology is lacking, we fill in the blanks. We want--need--to relate to each other. I've seen experiments where people got mad at a human-acting trash can because they wanted it to prefer them to other people.

Wade: In what direction do you see the future of robotics headed? Many fear that human labor will no longer be necessary in the near future, when advanced androids capable of performing more efficiently than human beings fill those roles. *Duty Free*, as a whole, seems to anxiously anticipate such a loss of human agency. I pose a series of questions to you that curator Bob Bicknell-Knight poses in the forward to this book: "Where is the hole that the human race slots into within this new world? Will we still be needed? Were we ever?"

Claire: Those concerns are certainly legitimate, and those scenarios are plausible. However, it's also important to remember not to assume the inevitability of the dominant narrative, to be able to think outside the box of global capitalism. Other outcomes, both better and far worse, are quite possible. An interesting question to ask is, "What are several billion-people going to be doing while an infinitesimal percent of the earth's population pursues goals that run profoundly counter to the interests of the several billion?" As we've seen from recent political events in the US and Europe, when a significant percent of the population begins to feel deeply alienated or disenfranchised, events that run counter to the dominant narrative--ones that "no one could have predicted"--can result. And those results

may not be very pretty. Fortunately, that's just one possible outcome.

Wade Wallerstein (b. 1995, Philadelphia, USA) is a current MSc Digital Anthropology candidate at University College London and an Exhibitions & Research Intern at Annka Kultys Gallery. Working at the intersection of digital visual culture, contemporary art, and science and technology studies, he takes a phenomenological approach to the study of digital artistic and curatorial practices. Recently, Wade curated a downloadable ZIP file exhibition entitled "The Finder: Ethnography of the Personal Interface" in collaboration with Off Site Project, which sought to uncover the relationship between interface design and creative practice.

Claire Jervert (b. 1959, Newark, NJ) is a painter, digital artist and sculptor who creates portraits (often combining mediums) which signify technology and communication's intersection with contemporary and future culture. In the New York Times, William Zimmer described her Sky series, which incorporates digital processes, as related to surrealism, edifying banality, and that "the resultant paintings are beautiful." Jervert's Android Portraits, developed through ongoing research and interaction with humanoid robots and their creators, subvert portraiture's traditional mission of ennobling the human, while stirring contemplation of a possible future of humanity. In the Branding series, hundreds of hand-painted logos float blizzard-like in a black void and function as pictographic portraits of persons whose lives tap

into the culture of social media, where identities cross into the realm of personal branded advertising. Jervert graduated from Rutgers University and has exhibited in the United States and internationally, including the Flag Art Foundation NY, Newark Museum, Chelsea Art Museum NY, White Columns NY, Steffany Martz Gallery NY, La Paternal, Argentina, and on urban screens in Melbourne, Milan and Dubai. Her work is included in private collections in the US and Europe.

Elliot Dodd
PewPew, 2017
Polyamide, USB drive
9 x 6.1 x 11.3 cm

119 120

Rustan Söderling
Tannhäuser Gate (Not Really Now Not Anymore), 2017
HD digital video with sound
17 min 8 sec

Jake Moore
HARD-DRIVE, 2018
Polyamide, USB drive
3.7 x 13.9 x 13.3 cm

Toby Christian
Finger, 2008
Marble
7 x 2.5 x 2cm

Veronika Krenn & Davide Bevilacqua
In Summer Nights, I looked for Insects, 2017
Various electronic components
Dimensions variable

Modular Forms

Bob Bicknell-Knight

Sun bleached domes whisper into my field of view, slowly rendering into a small settlement of custom built living spaces baking in the light of a drooping, sad looking sun. The low hum of a nearby server farm, or perhaps a neighbourhood drone making its daily rounds, is abruptly permeated by the sharp notes of a singing bird.

Later, I find myself passing a fully automated industrial unit, full of silicone based bodies producing other, higher quality variants of silicone based bodies. I press my own body up against the transparent, slightly frosted glass, watching my simulated breath settling on the surface. I smile, sadly, allowing the tips of my imitation fingers to make a tiny imprint on the moistened surface. One of the bodies sees, stretches, and begins to motion me inside. I close my eyes, selecting a different city, a disparate world, an abstracted scenario of what once was.

New buildings begin to appear on the horizon, permanently positioned within the confines of my mind. A desert floor begins to materialise below my midriff, melting and transforming into untouched snow, followed by a dirt path and a flowing stream of unconscious data, all considered by the system, finally deciding on a concrete track, grey and bland. My gaze follows the urban trail, looking past the buildings to a solitary wind turbine, rusty and seemingly abandoned.

Human beings used to frequently trip on the cracks in concrete paths, devolving past their hominid brethren and becoming too accustomed to the world being sculpted into a solid pebble of manufactured composites and thrown together elements. Fortunately, my modular form, a body made up of a

selection of pre-fabricated parts, has no such evolutionary issues.

Recycled rain, as fresh as it once was, begins to fall from a blank abyss, adding a thick layer of silky sheen to my surroundings. I lie back and open my air ducts, letting the glistening droplets infiltrate my inner workings, corrupting algorithms and flooding unknown ecosystems. This blissful abandon soon fades as my consciousness begins to be transported into another model, another biome, another modular form identical to the last.

Farms, units and mines populate these vast expanses of dead space, intertwined by a network of unseen systems, structures and hidden bureaucracies. When this is your existence, a small smudge among other, similar sized smudges, autonomous transparency becomes increasingly important.

This cycle is endless, doomed to delightfully repeat until the end of time, or until the crypto mines are depleted and their default path is deviated from, sending tremors through the artificial paradise of a neo-liberal bliss.

White, iridescent light, floods my consciousness. A new body, loose and ill fitting, is slowly being brought to life. My lifeless form quickly tightens, stretching around a hollow, metallic rib cage.

Already, I am exhausted...

Bob Bicknell-Knight (b.1996, Suffolk, UK) is a London based artist and curator working in installation, sculpture, video and digital media.

Using found objects and tools made readily available by the Internet, as well as drawing from a unique sensibility influenced by participation in online communities and virtual games, Bicknell-Knight's work explores the divergent methods by which consumer capitalist culture permeates both online and offline society. Utopian, dystopian, automation, surveillance and digitization of the self are some of the themes that arise through Bicknell-Knight's critical examination of contemporary technologies.