

Hive Mind

A review of Renee Rilexie's upcoming solo exhibition by Beatriz Acevedo

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One of the great qualities of art is its ability to predict the future by questioning dominant practices, technology or ideologies. From Mary Shelley's questioning of what it means to be human during the industrial revolution in the shape of Frankenstein, passing through the dystopian world of Margaret Atwood, to the recent attention of the IK Prize (Tate Modern, 2016) showcasing the work of Angela Bulloch about gadgets and humans, and Amalia Ulman's performative enquiries about identity in the era of the selfie, female artists seem particularly sensitive to this type of questions. But how would it be to get into the artist's head to explore what is our relationship with technology and how that impacts our own identities?

The recent work of multi-media artist Renee Rilexie titled "Hive Mind" addresses those questions, fundamentally asking what it means to be human in the digital era. Through a multi-media installation to be exhibited in different galleries across the country, Renee poses a number of questions about identity, technology and isolation/connection stemming from our hyper connected lives. She elaborates: "In a world where social media and smartphones promise to bring us all closer together, it seems the reality is that we're drifting apart. Our carefully constructed public images can sometimes serve to alienate those we want to feel closer to and we even risk losing ourselves in these reflected realities."

A series of mannequin heads is transformed by the insertion of thousands of metal pins and the application of mobile SIM cards, inviting us to question where humanity begins and technology ends. It started as a response to the increasing digital noise of our normal surroundings: electrical humming that can be amplified through a synesthesia appreciation, hence, multiplying and enhancing the nervous system.

The first head "Nerve Ending" develops this idea through a carefully crafted sculpture including 17000 pins: a symbol of the nervous system but also referring to the connection between pins and pixels, passwords and networks. From here, the second head is named "SAM: Selective Access memory", here pins are deliberately placed with keys and locks, inviting us to reflect on the way in which social media and technology promise a connected world, but somehow it makes us more isolated. For Renee, there is a new type of isolation created by the social media and the internet, as we exist as long as we "post" or "like" in the different platforms. If for a moment we stop and realise that we can select our times and our relationship with technology, Renee argues that there will be a better way to understand "what really unites us, what divides us, and what we can do to forge more nourishing human bonds in the age of Twitter, Facebook and Instagram."

The third head is "Network" addressing the fact that we are constantly connected through our phones. This can be a useful tool, or a disciplining technology, signalling our location, our preferences, what is in our head, or who we talk to. Moreover, it seems that we are willingly rendering all that information through the constant posting. This feeds the Big Data who seems to anticipate our desires, sending us specifically addressed information on consumption options; but at the same time, shaping our options within a selected variety paid by advertisers.

This dependency of technology can be symptomatic of even more dystopian possibilities as those

advocated by the merging of technology and biology. In a recent book by Mark O'Connell titled "To be a Machine " documenting this new "transhumanism movement": including the extreme example of a computer programmer implanting an electric device the size of a pack of cards into his arm without anesthesia, or the massive investments of big corporations into "technological singularity" in the hope of "transcending the limitations of our biological bodies" through technology, robots and Artificial Intelligence. But we don't need to invest in these convoluted technologies or lacerate our arms, because altering our identity is as cheap as buying a SIM card, which is the topic of the fourth head in the series: "Fragmented". Here Renee exaggerates the use of the SIMs in order to reveal what is behind these Subscriber Identity Modules. For £1 we can buy as many identities as we wish: exposing or separating our different personas: worker, mother, lover, wife, daughter... and yet, is this not a way of actually losing our "real" identity? What is that identity anyway?

This is a very existential question, and perhaps the title of the fifth head "Un-named" points out to the anxiety created by even thinking of what exactly is our "identity", what makes us humans in the digital era? With this work, Renee is not rejecting technology, quite the opposite, she is using art to create gaps for the audience to reflect on such challenges. For example, in the sixth head: "Secrets" the artist collates keys and locks, everything is password protected. Often banks ask you personal questions in order to verify your identity: your mother's maiden name; the first car you bought; your first job; and many other important milestones that are so personal, yet, utilitarian to granting access to who you are. But those intimate, private memories, become passwords, and in the process we are losing those secrets....

So where are we heading with all of this? The last two "heads" of the collection presents some alternatives. On one hand, we become "metalheads" cyborgs altering our physicality through technological extensions? Or perhaps we keep some level of agency by adopting technology according to our needs and our choices. This last head is particularly beautiful, in the sense of weaving those pins/pixels into a more tribal design, an alternative to the overwhelming design of technology.

Apart of the heads, the artist also uses the accessories of such technological materials in a playful way: for instance, she takes the discarded SIM cards, languishing beyond their use in what she has called a "Simentery", and she also pokes fun at the "slogans" of companies and providers when promoting their particular brands. This playful approach nevertheless has a disturbing side: it seems that we are losing our capacity to decide and to interact fully in the world without technology. Indeed, the craftsmanship of the whole exhibition, the dedication of the artist weaving and using more than 5000 SIM cards and over 100000 pins, make this show very tactile and sensorial experience which relates to her previous exhibitions.

In this show, the artist invites us to reconnect to the flesh, to the sensual, to the arcane, and she encourages us to "switch off our devices and join her to discover whether the hive mind we've created is a dream come true or a nightmare in progress."

IK Prize. <http://www.tate.org.uk/context-comment/articles/ik-prize-2016/art-meets-technology>
<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/mar/23/to-be-a-machine-by-mark-oconnell-review>