

## Jumping Scales

The depth and complexity of our routine interface with technology in our contemporary era is, unquestionably, multidimensional. This presents a different paradigm for both the production and reception of an artwork. In his essay accompanying artist collective Lou Cantor's project *The Labor of Watching* (2015–2016), William Kherbek states that "The process of seeing an object may be understood to be as much about revealing more than merely the physical properties of an object as it is displayed or experienced, but about uncovering the messages the space inscribes in the interpretation of the object."<sup>1</sup> Further, the viewer's own human attention is enmeshed, embedded and changing within its technological environment. Simply put, the artist is not only navigating how the space surrounding an artwork "inscribes," but also the unconscious and conscious ways the audience's attention is formed and influenced by a feedback loop within a profit-motivated technological environment. Indeed, this scenario presents a crossroads for contemporary artistic production.

The world as imagined by Lou Cantor is one in which communication is variable, situational, and transactional; it is in relay with a subject whose perception of their surrounding conditions is equally mutable. Lou Cantor is an artist collective comprised of Józefina Chętko and Kolja Gläser, which research the notion of

1 William Kherbek, "Collision Discourses: Representing and Concealing the Dynamics of Labour and Desire" in *The Labor of Watching* (Basel: OSLO 10, 2015), accessed electronically January 27, 2021, [www.loucantor.com/the-labour-of-watching](http://www.loucantor.com/the-labour-of-watching).

2 Hito Steyerl, "Too Much World: Is the Internet Dead?" *e-flux journal*, no. 49 (November 2013), accessed electronically January 27, 2021, [www.e-flux.com/journal/too-much-world-is-the-internet-dead](http://www.e-flux.com/journal/too-much-world-is-the-internet-dead).

3 Mark B. N. Hansen, "System-Environment Hybrids" in *Emergence and Embodiment: New Essays on Second-Order Systems Theory*, ed. Bruce Clarke and Mark B. N. Hansen (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2009), 113–42.

4 Hansen, "Engineering Pre-Individual Potentiality," 56.

"intersubjectivity" and how the feedback between medium, message and meaning evolves given the development of technological efficiencies, commerce, and design. Their practice recalls Hito Steyerl's often quoted statement that "The all-out internet condition is not an interface but an environment."<sup>2</sup> They develop installations, sculptures, performances, and publications that show the diffusion and diversification of communication within the contemporary realm.

Lou Cantor's *Spiritual Reality* (2017–present) is an ongoing series of speculative fiction that imagines the near future of automation, where the human-AI (Artificial Intelligence) relationship becomes commonplace. The "spirit" in *Spiritual Reality* signals the almost metaphysical or ghostly dance between our objects animated by function and the user's adaptation to and with them. The "chatbot" sculptures from *Spiritual Reality* on display in *Spatial Affairs* demonstrate this relationship. The works invite the visitor to speak into a human mouth, surrounded by a sound dampening shield that typically accompanies a microphone. Similar to a non-responsive Alexa or Siri, the interaction provokes frustration in the viewer, who expects some sort of exchange with the chatbot receiving the audio. Instead, the speaker is met with silence. The disconnect between the design of the object and its assumed purpose forefronts how the individual is conditioned by its interaction with technology. By suggesting and then thwarting the contact between the chatbot and the viewer, Lou Cantor reveals the stoppages and imperfections that underlie the assumed seamlessness of these relations.

Theorist Mark B. N. Hansen's writing on the complexification of human consciousness through and with a technologically advanced environment is helpful in elaborating the changes between humans and machines offered in Lou Cantor's *Spiritual Reality*. In his two essays on his concept of a system-environment hybrid (SEH), "System- Environment Hybrids" and "Engineering Pre-Individual Potentiality: Technics, Transindividuation, and 21st Century Media," Hansen describes how humans (or the "human bodymind") unavoidably rely on the agency of informational complex environments to achieve cognitive tasks.<sup>3</sup>

This distributed extension of consciousness into the environment puts forth a "technical distribution" as humans and machines become entangled. He argues that a separation exists between operationality and awareness, such that when we act within smart environments our actions are coupled with computational agents functioning beyond our awareness. This offers a mixed form of agency, as Hansen explains:

In a world increasingly *supported* by twenty-first-century media, the direct impact of media on human experience is thus massively overshadowed by its indirect impact; accordingly, instead of furnishing prostheses that expand experiential capacities beyond the various inbuilt limits of our sense organs and memory, today's media directly impact the very sensible continuum, the source of potentiality, from which delimited, agent- or faculty-centered higher-order experience springs.<sup>4</sup>

Humans remain operationally blind to the microprocesses of the technologically enabled environments they inhabit, while

remaining informed by them. Attention or awareness is thus complicated by this push and pull between a human body-mind and its smart environment.

The scenario explained by Hansen contains a sinister thread. Our smart environments are not entirely neutral, but optimized for profit. Lou Cantor touch on this in their research as well, and in an interview for *Rhizome*, recognize a transactional element at work:

The field of inter-subjectivity can be thought of as a trading zone—a place where thoughts and ideas are confronted, valued, exchanged, some resonate and make a career for themselves, and some fall into oblivion. All the devices and technologies you mentioned change the nature of our communication; they enhance speed and precision—or perhaps the opposite...They memorize, and they monitor us. They observe humans in the same way devices were used to measure, for example, weather phenomena in the past, and they bring meaning to dynamic systems. In the economic reality in which we live today, they also render that meaning as a transaction.<sup>5</sup>

Artists, as meaning-makers, must maneuver within this hyper-surveilled context, where the audience's own senses are always already linked to technological processes. When we speak of the "multidimensional" within the computer-assisted blur of representational and nonrepresentational image production—a central theme of the exhibition *Spatial Affairs*—it is imperative to recognize the economic reality that drives the development of technological forms. Monetization is a slow boil under the surface of scrolling, posting, geolocating, downloading, searching, speaking, and saving. While Hansen elucidates the many ways human consciousness is extended, it is essential to remember that the convenience of these interactions ultimately carries a price.

How, then, do artists wield their work to speak to this circumstance? How do they create art that speaks to these overly speculated spectators? Rosa Menkman's video installation *Whiteout* (2020) narrates the total disappearance of grounding that occurred when the

5 William Kherbek, "Artist Profile: Lou Cantor" in *Rhizome*, accessed electronically January 27, 2021, [www.rhizome.org/editorial/2015/oct/14/artist-profile-lou-cantor/](http://www.rhizome.org/editorial/2015/oct/14/artist-profile-lou-cantor/).

artist hiked up a mountain during a snowstorm, with only GPS and an electro-magnetic radiation reader as a guide. Engulfed by snow, Menkman lost all markers of space, depth, and destination. She expresses her terror, fascination and sense of transcendence on the trail. The navigation of this entirely white terrain, with only minimal data to lead the way to the summit, is the inspiration for *Whiteout*. Profoundly moved by her disorientation, the artist weaves a visual essay on the topic of “impossible images,” defined as images that see beyond the wavelength of light or at the absolute smallest increment of time. These images are out of range without technical help, and they recall Hansen’s description of “operational blindness.” Menkman’s meditation on grasping the ungraspable fades into a rapid-paced, black and white montage of centuries of instruments and diagrams used to chart and distill perception, such as test patterns, grids, and anatomic drawings of the eye. The images are presented in such a quick succession to the viewer that they themselves become entirely imperceptible and impossible to differentiate. At the end of the video, Menkman’s voiceover narrates an entirely blank screen. As the observer peers into this sharply vacant visual void, Menkman closes the video with a call to open up the spectrum of awareness in an effort to “jump scales.” In other words, Menkman posits that one can find new methods or means to quite literally incorporate the beyond, or in her words, expose “new windows to other messengers.”

In *Whiteout*, Menkman is arguing for a new alignment. She is not alone in her endeavor, and there are numerous artists who are attempting to access or approximate a lived, hyper-extended state. Examples might

include the dance group FlucT’s feverish, violent performances accompanied by aggressively cut soundbites from American pop culture, or Simon Fujiwara’s installation *Empathy I* (2018) which implements a 5D simulator and motion platform seating (developed by a theme park ride fabricator) to acutely engulf the visitor using found footage of first-person scenes sourced from social media. For all of these instances, the artist supercharges every informational avenue, leading to an amplification that is not dissimilar from our actual existence. What is suggested is not transcendence or escape, but a heightened encounter within the deep belly of a manic reality. As challenging as it may appear, the task is to write poetry from this position of extended consciousness—to script passages for our posthuman selves, to create tapestries in the round, to transmit signals to inhabitants within a continually morphing sensible continuum, adrift in an ocean of sentience.