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Nostalgia for the Lost Subject of Technology in the Work of Casey Reas

by Johanna Drucker

IN SEPTEMBER 2015, my colleague Casey Reas showed several new large-scale digital works in an exhibit titled Linear Perspective at Charlie James's gallery in downtown Los Angeles. Though each piece on display was very distinct, they were all made from remediated images, captured from mass and social media sites, that streamed nonstop in the projections and displays.

The lush, visually complex, high-level stimulus of the works evoked an unexpected response — nostalgia. Their inherently ephemeral quality created a longing for something irrecoverable. For all their contemporary state-of-the-art style, these works seemed to speak of a lost human subjectivity, as if Reas were trying to reference a moment in which humanity and technology were more innocently bound to each other, a moment now irrevocably lost. Looking at the flickering, drifting, reworked images, I felt I was getting a glimpse of machines' notions of who we are, or were — as if the signal streams were returning their algorithmic image of us for reflection. Paradoxically, these instants of time, sliced from recent media streams, felt far removed from the present, as if only a trace memory remains of the lives we are living.

This might seem like an odd response to such a visually rich installation, in which the pieces were displayed on poster-sized screens, in projections, and on monitors. They used standard hardware — cool, neutral, basically soulless — to display a visualized data feed of information signals processed into graphical files. I sat down with Reas to discuss his thoughts about visual technology, and the way the melancholic impact was aligned with his larger interests. Several concerns have threaded through all of his work: interest in the personal appropriation of cultural media images, a technical engagement with the manipulation of signals, and a persistent sense of the relevance of Plato's Allegory of the Cave, which continues, he thinks, to provide a useful framework for reflecting on visual experience and collective illusions. How, he asks, do media images configure our relations to ourselves in current circumstances? What is gained and lost in our daily encounters with these masses of graphical information?

As we spoke, he described his interest in the work of 20th century artists who had based their work on mass imagery and remediation — Kurt Schwitters, Robert Rauschenberg, Andy Warhol. Considerable distance separates those practices and his, which he acknowledges, but like these predecessors, Reas is more interested in collage work than the creation of original images. The expression of an individual subjectivity comes through differently in such work than in hand-drawn or painted images. The techniques of juxtaposition, selection, and sequence become the means by which a specific point of view is expressed. These artists reconfigure exteriority rather than expressing interiority, collapsing individual subject and cultural space. The self works as an organizing node, an inflecting filter, a point or location for redirection within the shifting, changing cultural

system. As journalistic artists, these collage practitioners work in the present, with an immediacy that belies the ephemerality of their images, and this only becomes fully apparent over time. Reas noted that he had recently seen a Warhol work of Pete Rose tying a baseball record in his hometown of Cincinnati. It was one of those "moments" — brief, fleeting, and significant — that really only mattered within a highly particular geographical and cultural context. Once historical distance removes the context, the image is inadequate to communicate the full impact of a moment.

The images in the two wall screen pieces — "Today's Ideology (26 July 2015)" and "Today's Ideology (23 August 2015)" — are extracted from an archive of the editorial images from a single day's New York Times. That day that is already gone, long vanished, by the time the images are being sorted and sifted. So whether the signals are dithered, scattered, repatterned by stochastic processes or mechanistic ones, the record of lived experience and mediated communication has already become signal — quantized data for which the referent has vanished. Traces remain, and so we focus on them, staring, seeking some meaning in the details and pattern of the whole.

These works clearly demonstrate Reas's concerns — the creation of new image streams from technical manipulation to produce a viewing situation in which simulation and illusion are reconfigured in the present. The news images, portraits, and self-portraits posted online are, fundamentally, coded signals. Reas takes mathematician Claude Shannon's thesis — that signal and meaning have no necessary relation to each other in informational terms — as a basic tenet; the absolute divide identified by Shannon separates communication technology from human meaning, and his principles underpin the science of signal transmission and manipulation on which Reas draws. Human beings are irrelevant to these exchanges, and thus we sense the loneliness of the long distance pulses in the racing streams of networked signals communicating their mathematically computed data without regard to meaning. Reas's work suggests a tectonic shift away from Martin Heidegger's famous formulation of human subjectivity in The Age of the World Picture, as if the computational apparatus enunciates its own subject position, waving to us from across a gulf we cannot cross.

Reas's image selection process is specific to each project. The source for "Linear Perspective," is above-the-fold images from the online New York Times. The wall projection is painterly, with its broad ribbons of imagery stroking across the wall. Staring into those colored bands, you became aware that they contained a world of references. The interweaving ribbons remediated the original news feeds at a dreamlike pace and motion. One watches without comprehension, trying to decode the warped visuals, overwhelmed by the mass and sheer volume of the display. The surface organizes itself as a painterly image, with details momentarily legible and then subsumed into the pattern of the whole. All humanity seems mere trace in the streaming output without beginning or end. Where, we have to wonder, can we see ourselves in this articulation of our representation of our present? The Allegory of the Cave is all too palpable in the seductive absorption these images produce — all surface, formatted from the on-screen drama of our collective lives.

Another piece, "All Your Face Are Belong to Us," consists of faces pulled from a feed of profiles of people who follow the @REAS Twitter account. Rapidly recycled in combinatory play, they shift endlessly from one to another, unstable, ephemeral as a rushing freshet of digital flow, the images haunting. Only a partial view, glimpse, or configuration would cohere — just for an instant, an interval so brief it was at the threshold of cognitive capacity for recognition. All the identities in the world seemed stacked into a single stream running before our eyes. Our own selves, those we know, and all the people in the world beyond our knowing all flashed by even as the chance of finding ourselves was diminished to near zero. Finding and recognizing are so fundamental to identity that not be able to stop the stream long enough to find a familiar visage is disturbing and negating. No individual matters, nothing holds stable, the machine processing relentlessly. A human subject cannot constitute itself in such circumstances, only remember that it was once able to do so, our gaze held without any chance of a gaze returned. The visceral effect of this combination of beauty and sadness, plenitude and void, is profoundly ineffable: nostalgia for the lost (human) subject of technology.

The two final pieces, in a separate room, "KTTV (August 2015)" and "https://www.youtube.com/result?-search_query=adventuretime" were exquisite in their finely resolved display. The sampling that activated the screen and the sound track was algorithmically driven. The result was machine poetry, hypnotic and remark-

ably absorptive. Sitting with the headphones and watching the bits of visual information change in the elegant grids, I got lost. All sense of time, of body — of anything but the feed and its rhythms and changes — disappeared. The signal stream was so beautiful, so completely absorbing, that I could have drifted and floated on its irregular repetitions for hours. I had never felt so close to a computational process, so affected by it, as if I were hearing the music of machines, program-talk, and algorithm-speak — articulated by the very impulses that drive a computational process toward its own self-realization. Is it too romantic to imagine such yearning? Is this a mere projection of human desires onto the workings of a mechanical process? Perhaps, and perhaps not. Perhaps it involves a recognition of what it is to be inside that sensibility, hear its streams of configured articulation, its own thought-forms and expressions.

It came to me that my colleague's works express a certain too-late-ness for humanity, the impossibility of survival of our former notion of subject formation, of our sense of an interior life, and our relation to the social forms of language and image. The World Picture doesn't need us. Identity formation seems to have shifted, into exteriority and surface recognition, which we reach for only to have it flee in the rapid refresh of information. We are not subjects, we are mere minute constituent elements. These works position us within the technological apparatus, testifying to the impossibility of recovering our illusory interior lives, and demonstrating how we come to construct ourselves through current media and its particularities. We seek feedback for our selves as selfs, within the processing apparatus and mechanisms of the culture — but also, in the conversational exchange of an afternoon with a colleague, through which I got a glimpse of Reas's absorption with these mechanisms and their capacity to process us, to process our represented identities as signals in their own code.

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