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The Creators Project

Ai Weiwei, Liu Bolin, and More Explore the 'Invisible Threads' of Technology

DJ Pangburn
July 29, 2016

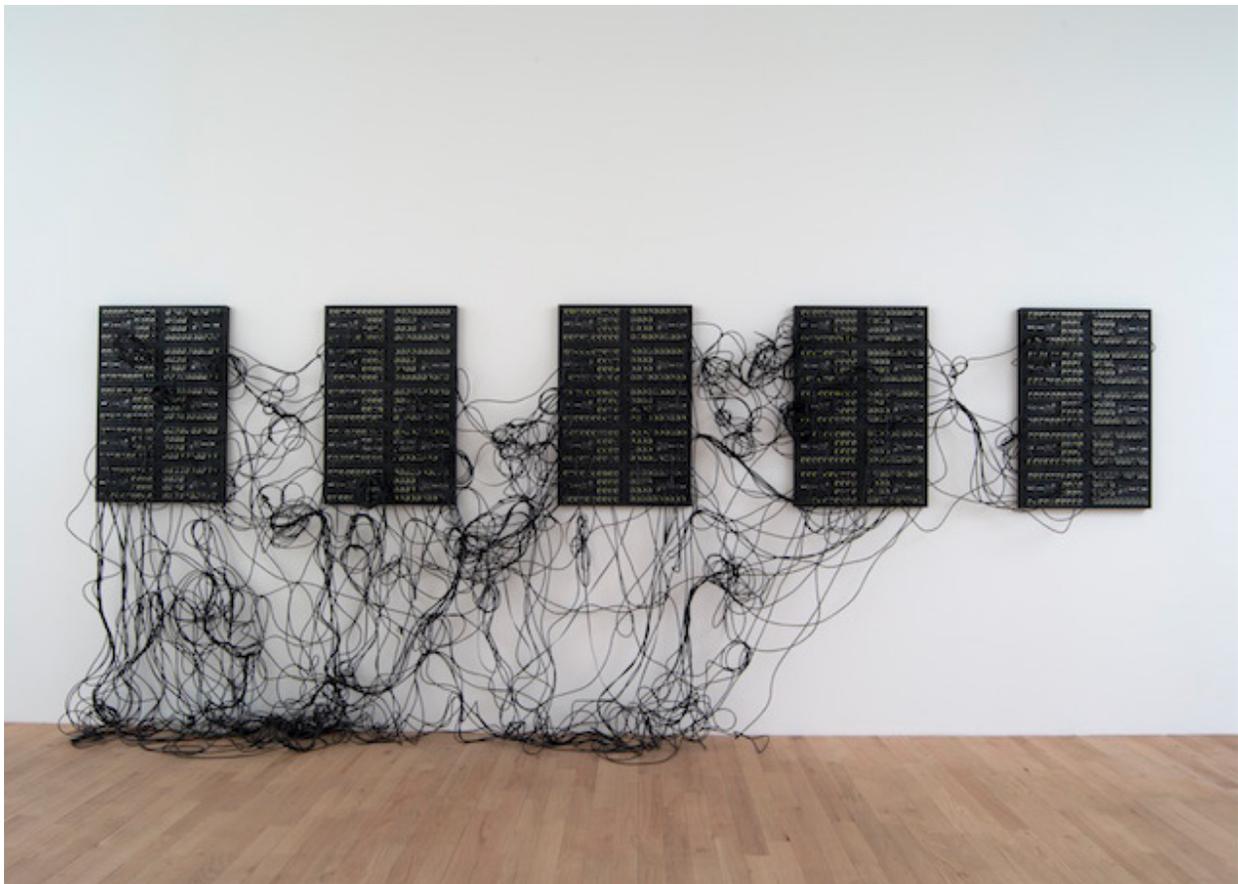


Liu Bolin, Angels, 2010. Set of three pieces, 120 x 70 x 75 cm each. Chargers and fiberglass. All images courtesy the Art Gallery at NYU Abu Dhabi, unless otherwise noted

In the new book *Trees on Mars: Our Obsession with the Future*, journalist and futurism skeptic Hal Niedzviecki sees technology product cycles as amplifying and, indeed, multiplying tensions and human anxieties. Beyond psychological effects, he points out that technology impacts communities, economies, politics and culture.

Working a similar type of critical analysis, NYU Abu Dhabi Art Gallery's (NYUAD) fall exhibition, *Invisible Threads: Technology and its Discontents*, examines how tensions are bubbling up in ever increasing frequency. Featuring work from 15 international artists, including Chinese artist Ai Weiwei and American artist Addie Wagenknecht, the show explores, amongst other things, how isolation versus connectedness, and privacy versus social media, are impacting individuals, communities and nation-states.

In advance of the exhibition, which runs from September 22 to December 31, co-curators Scott Fitzgerald and Bana Kattan gave The Creators Project a peek behind the curatorial process. They also answered questions about whether art fueled by technology creates its own anxieties in the process of critiquing technological culture's psychological effects.



Addie Wagenknecht, XXXX.XXX, 2014. From the series 'Data and Dragons', 5 custom-printed circuit boards, ethernet patch cables, 80/20 aluminum. Courtesy bitforms gallery, New York. Photo: John Berens

“We did not want to do just another art and technology show,” Kattan tells The Creators Project. “We wanted to do a show that exposes technology and our use and relationships with it. It’s more about people and their interaction with technology than it is about technology or its intersection with art.”

The Creators Project: The exhibition explores the tensions that grow out of everyday interactions with technology, from feeling isolated or connected, or being private versus being open about one's life on social media. But what other tensions exist that informed the exhibition and were explored by the artists?

Scott Fitzgerald (SF): I think a lot of these issues come from the fact that these tools can't respond back in a meaningful way, as perhaps a person might. If your friend does something unexpected, you can easily ask them why they did that. If your phone does something you don't expect, you typically have no way to engage in meaningful communication with the device. This is particularly unsettling when we begin to have attachments to these objects. There's an intimacy that comes from using an object everyday, even if it's a piece of glass and silicon. When that device can't return the affection, there's a sense of frustration and un-fulfillment.

We are also looking to expose the frameworks that facilitate these types of interactions. We tend to trust that these machines "just work", even if there's not a true understanding of the mechanisms that make them function the way they do. Works like Philip Stearns' *Chandelier for Many Possible Ends* helps expose the background transmission of information and what sort of background information is present at all times, whether it's natural or man-made.

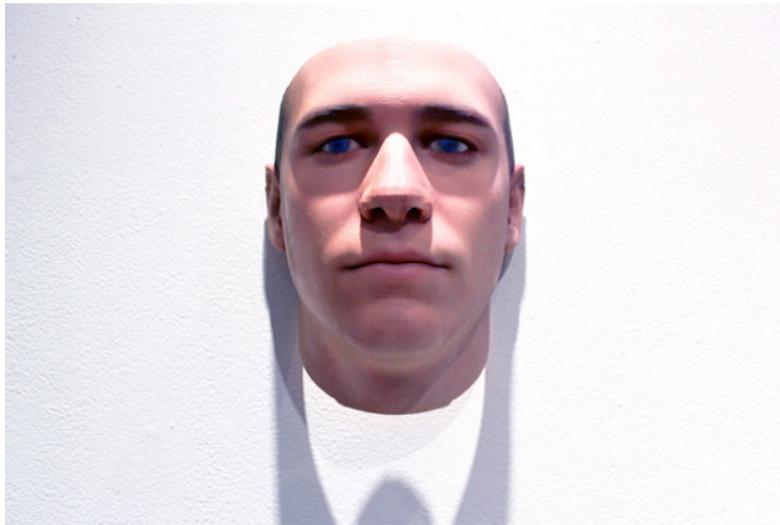


Wafaa Bilal, *Canto III*, 2015. Bronze sculpture with gold finish, 37 x 27 x 15 inches.

Bana Kattan (BK): Personally, I find the tension between how technology exposes us and sometimes works against us, and how we can expose technology the most interesting tension explored in this exhibition. A great example of how technology can expose us in an unplanned or unexpected way is seen in Jamie Allen's *Lie Machine*. Allen links a voice stress analysis machine to autobiographical audio books being read by the authors themselves. In this way, the artist uses the technology in a way that was not intended by its manufacturer. The result creates a different representation of that autobiography, and of that person, created without his or her consent—a reality and side-effect of technology.

Another great example of this is by the youngest artist in the show, Kenny Wong. His work, *Squint*, would even turn against him as its maker. The piece is comprised of a wall of interactive mirrors which pick up surrounding light from the gallery and shine it directly into the viewer's eye standing across from it, both irritating us and putting us in a spotlight.

Finally, a work like Addie Wagenknecht's *XXXX.XXX* exposes a part of our daily use of technology which we cannot normally see. Her 16-foot-wide sculpture revels network traffic via blinking lights, bringing to light a brief moment in time where we can actually see the piece register wifi data traveling through the air, from one inbox to another.



Heather Dewey-Hagborg, *Stranger Visions*, 2013.

If technology produces tension and anxiety, do you think that art focused technology produces somehow its own tension and anxiety when viewers look at it?

SF: Technology doesn't only produce anxiety (though to me, it's certainly part of the system), it also offers us a hope for something better, a promise to ourselves that we can rise above our physical and cognitive limitations. Michael Joaquin Grey's *My Sputnik* is emblematic of this, in that [the] first artificial satellite signaled hope for half the world, and fear for the other half. Liu Bolin's *Angels and Hanging Man*, from his *Charger Series*, also reflect this dichotomy. These tools have the capacity to lift us up or drag us down.

BK: The works I mentioned absolutely produce their own anxiety, as they are either revealing something about technology we cannot normally see, or are using technology in an unintended way. However the work that comes to mind most when thinking about this is Siebren Versteeg's *Like*. In this piece, a computer program not only creates its own painting, it then runs its own Google image search on its work and evolves based on what it finds online. This is the computer playing the role of the artist, then searching our images and trying to become more similar to humans.

Another work I cannot help but mention, is Heather Dewey-Hagborg's *Stranger Visions*, which creates anxiety about the future as you realize what could easily be right around the corner. The artist extracts DNA from items collected in public places (strands of hair, chewing gum, cigarette butts, etc.) to create renderings of what the face of the person who left the item behind might look like. From the rendering, she then creates a 3D-printed mask of each DNA profile and mounts it in the gallery. If that doesn't make you anxious about the potential reach of technology, I don't know what will. At the same time, as Scott says, this is amazing, miraculous technology, with potential uses for great good, such as criminal investigation, and even for historical research using material objects.

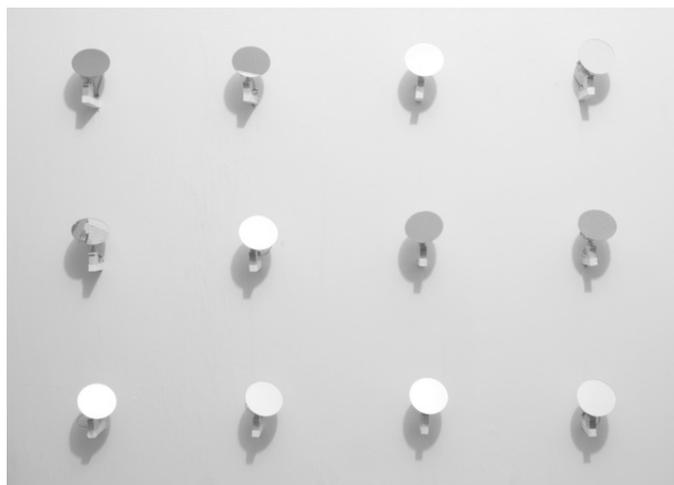


Liu Bolin, *Charger Man*, 2010. 180 x 50 x 30 cm. Stainless steel, mobile phone charger cables.

Were any works created specifically for the exhibition?

SF: Several of the artists created new work for the show. Each of them extended a part of their practice. Evan Roth made a new print in an existing series of his: lifting fingerprints off of touch screens, indicating the hidden gestures that signify the interface between us and the tools we create. Monira Al Qadiri is making three wall-mounted sculptures that look to the pearling past of the Arabian Gulf, and the oil-heavy present.

BK: Wafaa Bilal is making a working satellite sculpture as a follow-up to his piece *Canto III* which is also included in the exhibit. The sculpture is made up of a satellite, a 1.5-inch replica of the Sadaam Hussein bust used in *Canto III*, and a selfie camera. After the work is shown in our exhibition, Wafaa will launch this new sculpture into space. The audience will then be invited to view the work in its orbit through images taken by the sculptures' selfie camera.



Kenny Wong, *Squint*, 2014. Interactive installation. Dimensions variable. Image courtesy of the artist

Do the tensions described above, and the work of the artists, integrate with the region and indeed the city of Abu Dhabi in any way?

This exhibit touches on a very universal theme and the UAE is a great place to have a globally relevant discussion. Not only is the UAE a very tech-savvy country, but it is also made up of remarkably connected population, due to it being home to a large number of expats. Over the years, it has become a hub for communication for people across the globe. Aside from the population, geographically, the UAE is also situated in a very central position for both cultural and technological exchange. This is part of the reason that one of the NYUAD Art Gallery's missions is to produce exhibitions that are both internationally significant and locally relevant.

Is the city receptive to exhibitions that critique technological systems?

There haven't been many (if any) exhibitions like this one in Abu Dhabi before, so we will wait and see what the response will be. The exhibition is taking a position of exploration, celebration, and most of all, humor about our anxiety around technological systems. It is our hope that this will get our audiences thinking about their relationship to technology in a more complicated way.



Taysir Batniji, Pixels, 2011. Pencil on paper, 14.5 x 19.5 cm each. Collection of Barjeel Art Foundation

What, if anything, do you hope visitors take away from *Invisible Threads*?

We hope that the exhibit can generate dialogue and reflection around each visitor's personal reliance on these everyday technologies. I can imagine that this exhibition will generate a slight paranoia, but I hope that visitors also see the reach that technology gives us. There is a beautiful balance between technologies supporting our want for individuality and information, while also making us part of the collection of mega data.

Invisible Threads runs from September 22 to December 31, 2016 at The NYU Abu Dhabi Art Gallery.