

## Objectifying Our Digital Lives

by E. Odin Cathcart - September 30, 2015

PORTLAND, Ore. — In her book *The Severed Head*, a meditation that uses the lens of art history to affirm the sacred in a world of electronic interactions, Julia Kristeva correctly undermines the 1990s promise that the internet would bring a heightened sense of democracy and dissolve geographic boundaries. Instead, she says, that promise has led to "collective alienation." Any notion of technological Platonism has been rendered mute by Edward Snowden's devastating reveal. The darknet, state-run surveillance, and government censorship have permeated the



electronic lives we live. Despite this fade from utopia, we continue to gobble up social media, electronic devices, and revel in online shopping, inured to the underlying conceits.

For the first time the New York art nonprofit Eyebeam has brought an exhibition to the West Coast and, unironically, chose Portland. Eyebeam in Objects features work by technology-centric artists and is on view at Upfor gallery, which focuses on new and digital media and stands out in a city that can lean toward the provincial.

Most of the works on display here either mimic online interactions or serve as visual metaphors for domestic objects, speaking to how technology has become normalized and habitual even though it often carries with it a potential for surveillance. The works give form to notions that we generally conceive as immaterial, while allowing us to become witnesses to our own rote behaviors. It is precisely this interplay between objectifying and conceptualizing our digital world that gives depth to the show as it hinges on our Faustian relationship to technology as we exchange it for our privacy. The concept, brought forth by Eyebeam's director, Roddy Schroock, involved asking seven Eyebeam artists who generally make conceptual and media-related work to produce physical objects.

In sharing what instigated Eyebeam in Objects, Theo Downes-Le Guin, owner and director of Upfor Gallery, told Hyperallergic:

Roddy and I talked about the fact that Eyebeam is well known by artists nationally, and is well known in the Northeast, but it doesn't have much of a viewer or donor base on the West Coast. Which is odd because the West Coast is arguably where the heart and soul of high tech, or at least the tech indus-

try, lives, and no one is doing exactly what Eyebeam does. From that discussion the exhibition was born, a little step to further connect Eyebeam to the West Coast and vice versa.

Highlights of the show touch upon digital aspects of our lives that either have a direct daily impact, such as our obsessions over social media, or a potential future one, darkly revealed in “Liberator Rounds” by Addie Wagenknecht, which turns George Hyde’s 3D printable FP-45 Liberator gun into a hanging art object. Her faux chandelier serves as a metaphor for technology’s duality — 3D printers don’t kill people, people do — and subverts or conceals the intent of the Liberators by aestheticizing them.



Installation view of Eyebeam at Upfor Gallery

Like Wagenknecht, Chloë Bass aims to question the benevolence we perceive in the technologies we accept into our daily lives, such as a smartphone being promoted as a sleek communications platform — not an access point to our private lives by public and government entities. Chloë Bass’s “A person may be unaware of being photographed in a variety of situations” suffers from the very fate it sets out to reveal: the concept uncovered by Edward Snowden that we can literally be surveyed nearly anywhere today. As an art object alone, outside of its written description, the work feels more quaint than poignant. A sign says “do not touch” and yet a pair of glasses begs you to put them on in order to see the very tiny view screens contained in a small, wooden box. The left screen reveals the artist’s written responses to Laura Poitras’s *Citizenfour*, while the right displays surveillance video feeds culled from the internet.

Unsurprisingly, identity is a prominent theme in *Eyebeam In Objects*. Zach Blas’s “Contra-Internet Inversion Practice” series focuses on our relationship with social media and the web. Through cut-and-paste video captures, Blas both attempts to erase and reform his online identity by literally cutting and pasting sections of Beatriz Preciado’s “Contra-Sexual Manifesto” (a statement on gender and identity) along with other internet material to create a new manifesto entirely that places identity politics within the context of the internet. The video captures the use of Photoshop® to highlight the increasing lack of originality in digital mash-ups and regurgitated content, and hints at how easy it is to alter one’s identity today. While Preciado’s manifesto asserts the feminist right to resist the dominant male paradigm, Blas rails against the hegemonic dominance of the internet.

Technology sometimes merges the virtual and the physical, digitizing our biological information, as demonstrated in Heather Dewey-Hagborg’s “Invisible,” a kit that erases and obfuscates our DNA footprint from the world. This is another way the show examines our tenuous grasp on reality in the postmodern world — how do we maintain control over our identity while functioning in this highly technological society, knowing our biological trace can be lifted directly from our physical interactions with public spaces and digitized into databases accessible by anyone?

Increasingly, the lines are being blurred between individual, local, and global identity. In “Citizen Ex 001 and 002,” James Bridle puts national flag wedges into a kaleidoscopic arrangement as a front for the malleability of citizenship in the digital age. I couldn’t help but be reminded of Gregory Green’s “Caroline, A New Future: a project of the New Free State of Caroline,” a currently virtual state of citizenship outside of traditional governments. Green’s aim has always been to subvert centralized forms of control through the democratization of information and in the case of “New Free State of Caroline,” national identity. Bridle takes this a step further by suggesting the lines are already too blurred to subvert anything.

Zach Gage’s series *Glaciers* takes an On Kawara sense of daily documentation and places it firmly in the now of Google. Each poem is generated by querying Google prompts daily to complete a sentence, such as “who eats...” This makes the poems both dependent on algorithms that are invisible to the viewer and the human inputs they are generated from. In “A Question of Style,” Brian House similarly stresses the fact that machines are programmed by human beings. Two vintage Western Electric telegraph machines sit across the room from each other and periodically click away in Morse code, lending a sonorous element to the exhibition. The ‘code’ behind the telegraph machines is a recorded conversation between two people who were asked to use the machines even without the knowledge of Morse code. Occasionally, Gage substituted one person for a programmed “bot,” commonly used for online help. The piece questions what it means to be human in an electronic world where few of us actually know or understand the underlying code that shapes it.

The exhibition as a whole is well worth seeing even when a few pieces remain more esoteric. The fact that Upfor is working to bring these types of digital works to Portland, otherwise known as Silicon Forest, is a tremendous benefit to the art community and cultural growth of a city that enjoys repurposing the past rather than inventing the future — all the more ironic given the growing number of jobs here that are programming that future. If *Eyebeam In Objects* has one lesson for that future it’s to assume some personal responsibility for our citizenship and identity in an age that is increasingly out of our control.

*Eyebeam In Objects* continues at Upfor Gallery (929 NW Flanders Street, Portland, OR) through October 31.