Can Artists Help Us Reboot Humanism in an Over-Connected Age?

by Ben Davis
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Political artist Naeem Mohaiemen
(Courtesy Alyssa Blumstein)

Rhizome.org's annual "Seven on Seven" conference isn't really meant to have a theme beyond simply exploring the intersection of art and technology. Rhizome director Lauren Cornell plays yenta, matching various figures from the two fields who then brainstorm collaborations and build whatever prototypes can be whipped up in the very abbreviated 24-hours they actually have together (the teams first meet Friday morning, then talk, hatch an idea, and finally present on Saturday afternoon). It was notable, then, that at this year's conference — held April 14 at the New Museum — a theme did emerge organically: Quite a few of these pairs, in one way or another, were responding to a sense that the quality of mental experience was on the decline in our over-wired world.

When even the technologists start thinking that technology might be a little too overbearing, something may be up. Then again, not so long ago, Microsoft actually

tried to market its Windows Phone with a spot featuring a man fiddling obliviously with his phone in bed as his wife stood abandoned nearby in a silk negligee — if smartphone makers start trying to sell their gadgets by telling you that smartphones are destroying your sex life, a tipping point has definitely been reached.

Futurist Douglas Rushkoff kicked off “Seven on Seven” 2012 with a keynote proposing that the art-tech coupling had recently undergone a role-reversal. A few decades ago, he said, it was the computer geeks who were the practical ones, and the artists who were trying to figure out how to screw around to make technology freaky and interesting. These days, Rushkoff points out, the opposite is the case: The technologists are setting the pace in terms of pushing the frontiers of experience. The artists, on the other hand, have been reduced to the role of Jiminy Crickets sitting on their shoulders, pleading with them to think about the implications.

The various presenting couples offered some evidence to confirm Rushkoff's diagnosis. Thus, new-model photoconteptualist Taryn Simon and Internet activist Aaron Swartz conceived of a Web site for visualizing cultural differences. After you type in a search word, it runs simultaneous image searches on engines in a variety of countries, thereby displaying how different cultures see the world through different eyes. (Type in "Apple" and in almost every country, a picture of an actual apple comes up first; in the U.S., it's the Apple logo; in North Korea, it's a picture of collective farming.) Simon suggested that the site might cut against “the illusion of flattening” on the Web, offering some way of recovering a sense of the local.

Smart artist and filmmaker Jon Rafman and social-gaming entrepreneur Charles Forman hatched the idea for what they called a "Memory Box," a keepsake that would force you to look at a single image and record your reaction to it, before sealing for seven years, at which point it would reopen and show you the image once more with your original reaction. The notion offered a kind of poetic, brute-force solution to the reality that we have become so overwhelmed by images that we have stopped really thinking about them.

Probably the most direct response to the sense of overload came from thoughtful political artist Naeem Mohaiemen and one-time Twitter mastermind Blaine Cook, who formulated the idea of a social network that essentially forces you to slow down, via self-imposed limits on the number of items you can manipulate and the number of people you could interact with. As inspiration, Mohaiemen cited Nicholas Carr’s

book “The Shallows,” about how constant exposure to smartphones and computers is rewiring the brain in such a way as to destroy our ability for deep thinking.

This notion resonates with me. Once upon a time, when I was overwhelmed by my reading load in college, I took a speed reading course. The conclusion I came to was that the tricks of speed reading were fine for absorbing raw information, but useless when it came to processing literature. In fact, I realized that literary language was almost specifically engineered to thwart anyone who is trying to relate to it in this way. So I gave up on speed reading. Yet pretty much all those tricks — reading an article out of order, scanning paragraphs as single blocks — are now how I *naturally* process the flood of emails and online articles I have to consume everyday for my job.

How does aesthetic experience fare in such an environment? Within art-tech circles, the buzzthese days is about something called the “New Aesthetic,” a coinage of James Bridle, who launched a Tumblr of the same name dedicated to aggregating phenomena that blur together digital culture and real-world design, and seem characteristic of the present's plugged-in sensibility. In his response to the “New Aesthetic,” techno-pundit Bruce Sterling takes it to task for lacking any rigor or specificity, and just basically being a meusli of wicked cool images. My response to this response would be that it is this lack of rigor that makes this Aesthetic characteristically New. That’s the aesthetics of the shallows; that’s an avant-garde that’s been programmed to speed read — an aggregation of cool-looking things, with little to no logical connection, brought to you via Tumblr.

Tech types tend to be technological inevitabilists — if something is useful, it’ll catch on, and all there is to do is to surf the wave. Well, technology does have a powerful logic of its own, but utility isn’t really the last word. The environmental case is the best example. We used to love aerosol spraycans; now chlorofluorocarbons are banned because smart people realized that they were melting craters in the ozone layer. Certain contemporary pesticides are very useful, but they may also be behind the mass death of honeybees. Nuclear power is tremendously useful, but after last year's nightmare scenario in Japan, a great many people are having a rethink about whether it is worth the terrible environmental price.

Maybe our present-day glut of communication is just something we are becoming acclimated to, and we will all, in the future, be happily welded into our Google

Glasses, Borg-like. Or maybe at some point, we'll suffer the mental equivalent of a nuclear meltdown, and society will realize that we need to regulate our exposure to technology before it completely dehumanizes us. (As David Auerbach puts it in a recent essay debunking the idea of computer intelligence, computers are not going to adjust to our humanity naturally, so if we don't engage with them critically, there can only be one result: "Their dumbness will become ours.") Or maybe — this is the third way, and the one that the Rhizome conference by nature defaults to — some soulful inventors will find a way to use technology against itself, creating applications that somehow help cure us of our info addiction without forcing us to go cold turkey.

Will art have a place in this process of reinvention? Visual art, I think, does tend to have a more deliberate temporality, and it does value ideas that go against the stream (the early pioneers of net art were all united against what they called the "California Ideology" of Silicon Valley and Wired, according to Rachel Greene's Internet art history). But I tend to agree with the Irish new media artist Alan Butler, who told me in an interview last year that he thinks that the defining creative figures of our era, the Michelangelo and Leonardo equivalents, will be the likes of Steve Jobs and Mark Zuckerberg, not visual artists. The art world is very small indeed compared to the vast information and consumer technology juggernauts that rule our mental landscape — and their only motivation will ever be to get you to use their products more, more, and more.

Truth be told, the format of the “Seven on Seven” art-technology jam itself reflects the over-frantic present a bit, in its enforced R&D-as-speed dating scenario. Serious people will have to put in some deep-time thinking in order to solve what appears to be one of the defining dilemmas of the age: How to live with the tremendous power of technology without being consumed by it? Still, "Seven on Seven" was particularly satisfying this year, and the very fact that the conversations hatched within this sped-up scenario touched off this train of thought for me does give me a bit of optimism that there may be some solution that doesn't involve simply switching off for good.

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