General

Fear of Missing Out

Brigitte van der Sande

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Fear of Missing Out **(FoMO) at the Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA) in London (29–31 May 2015) was the catchy but not always relevant title of a three-day event with an impressive line-up of artists, theorists and activists who mapped out the state of technological, social, political and artistic practices in the present-day postdigital reality.**

Hito Steyerl and filmmaker Laura Poitras during a Skype interview at FoMO

Postdigital is understood here not as a reality *after* the digital era, but as a critical examination and understanding of the consequences of the digital reality. The key question at FoMO was: "At a time when online and 'real life' worlds are indecipherable, it appears that questions of how information is communicated and received, stored and shared, and by whom, remain a primary focus. If our postdigital lives are at odds with our image-based consumer culture and the excesses of the digital revolution, we ask, what choices do we have to exercise change?" The decision to invite artist and theorist Hito Steyerl to chair all discussions was brilliant. Her critical perspective on the digitization of our everyday reality gave a focus to the discussions and Q&As. The fear of missing out on any subject that could be even remotely connected to FoMO seemed the guiding principle of the curators. But none of the speakers seemed concerned about missing out; on the contrary most of them belong to the vanguard of their practice.

The first day of FoMO kicked off with a deeply pessimistic talk by Peter Sunde, who, like Edward Snowden, Chelsea Manning and Julian Assange is considered by some an enemy of the state, but by many others a freedom fighter. The co-founder of the file-sharing site Pirate Bay and the online service for micropayments Flattr was recently released from prison in Sweden after serving a six-month sentence for copyright offenses. In his opinion, the postdigital world is much worse than George Orwell ever imagined in *1984* (1949). Sunde provocatively advocated an extreme measure like intensified surveillance of people in the hope they would become so enraged about the 24 / 7 monitoring of their lives by the state and commercial parties that they would finally act. Despite Sunde's and a number of fellow fighters' fight for an open, free and safe Internet, we have reached the point of no return, he said.

The United States government pulled the Espionage Act of 1917 out of a hat to investigate and charge whistleblowers like Assange, Manning and Snowden. This law originates from the World War I as an act against "warfare propaganda" and stipulates that it is illegal for any person to publish any information "of such character that is or might be useful to the enemy." But if there's a war going on, who are the enemies? Laura Poitras's tense film *Citizenfour* (2014), which was screened during the event, shows that the US considers National Security Association whistleblowers like Snowden and William Binney before him to be enemies from within. The filmmaker herself, who was placed on the highest "threat rating" of the Department of Homeland Security's secret watch list, was repeatedly detained and interrogated when crossing the US border. During a Skype meeting with Steyerl prior to the screening Poitras described how she moved to Berlin in 2012 to protect her material from being confiscated. Always filming in real time instead of after the fact, Poitras has become an expert in ways to protect her source material.

Zurich- and London-based artists !Mediengruppe Botnik used a postal law that prohibits the opening of "real" mail to send a parcel to Assange at the Ecuadorian embassy, hiding a camera which broadcasted its journey through the postal system live stream on the Internet. *Delivery for Mr. Assange* (2013) became an immediate hit on the web, with people staying awake for twenty-four hours to watch the unspectacular images of the inside of postal bags, rooms at night and surprisingly and finally Assange himself, communicating with signs that read "Keep Fighting", "Free Anon" and "Thank You Ecuador". !Mediengruppe Botnik were adamant during the Q&A that this work did not have a political message—as if any action in connection to Assange could be anything but political—or that they were interested in finding gaps in the legal system. Rather they position themselves as artists who criticize and raise questions about systems that scare them.

This project shows that the digital world is intertwined with the material one. As sociologist Judy Wajcman and media theorist McKenzie Wark also pointed out during a session at ICA, old and new technologies penetrate and influence each other and society.

Wajcman noted that the devices that speed up our lives are the same ones we turn to in attempting to solve this problem of acceleration. Devices shape society as much as society shapes devices, or as Wark put it, picking up tools shaped the hand. Multimedia artist Yuri Pattison, who explores the ways in which the virtual world permeates material reality, called attention to the forgotten armies of people who maintain digital systems, for him a deliberate disconnect between the Internet and physicality, stating: All is in the Cloud and the Cloud is magic!

"If we are to play god, we might as well get good at it," was the seductive statement from Eleanor Saitta. And in her world that means playing with bodies, stories and systems. As a hacker, designer, writer and an artist she discovered that if an object or system looks right, it usually works right. Ethics can be operated as a subset of aesthetics, according to Saitta, a self-styled "barbarian". The best way to find out what makes a complex system beautiful or ugly is to play, as she does in live action role-playing games, usually known as LARP. Saitta believes LARP offers both the agency and sense of embodiment important to a deeper understanding of the world, and is a tool for playing out real conflicts.

A similar but at the same time very different use of games was shown in filmmaker and author Harun Farocki's four-part series *Serious Games* (2009–2010). As film studies lecturer Erika Balsom brought up in her introduction to the screenings, Farocki takes an ethical position by omitting images of war and showing only the preparations and aftermath of war, which in this case includes the training and psychological treatment of soldiers with videogames. Farocki assesses that the image is not a representation of war, but its instrument. The use of animated real-life wartime exercises to train the military in combat situations and to treat post-traumatic stress syndromes by the reenactment of the situation that caused the trauma confirms Farocki's theory. Saitta was, as could be expected, positive about the use of these games in addressing real questions about real stories. For example, the US Department of Defense uses games to train a soldier "to be a good stranger," i.e., prepare him to connect to the local population and not get shot.

Like the media and the food and energy industry, the control of digital systems lies in the hands of a few global players. Pattison and technofeminist Helen Hester talked about the attempt to sanitize the web of pornographic or gruesome imagery. Corporate parties outsource this task to underpaid workers in countries like India and the Philippines, and base the santization on algorithms fed by one kind of knowledge: that of the not very representative middle-aged men who programme them. Algorithms tend to fail in interesting and comical ways, Hester and Wajcman showed. Wajcman mentioned Googling "she invented" early on in the search tool's development, and getting the response: "Do you mean he?"

Gender- and race-based discrimination is exactly what the group of artists, writers, curators and academics of Women Inc. address in their lexicon. Inspired by the work of Steyerl, Women Inc. proposes neologisms like "Mouffe Diving" (gratuitous invocation of critical theory), "Seoul Searching" (opportunistic curatorial globetrotting), "Quantum Misogyny" (white male hegemony buttressed by dubious art historical arguments) and "Tote Brag" (a tote bag from a far-flung biennial or art fair that indicates the wearer's status as an important art-world traveller). Though usually funny and sometimes hilarious, Women Inc.'s response to the question about the point of this whole exercise if it remained confined to the art world was offensive: they also have a word for "a man in the audience who keeps on talking and doesn't let go of the mic." With this attitude they don't do justice to the existing gender and race issues, nor to the artist who inspires them. Let alone give insight into the question of whether reality changes when you change the vocabulary.

The hallucinatory performance WE ARE THE INTERMORPHS by Ashkan Sepahvand

immersed the audience in a tsunami of hysterical images, text and ear-splitting video clips by LaTour (*People Are Still Having Sex*, 1991), Michael Ozone (*Perfect Systems*, 2012), Louisa Minkin (*Yes to Life*, 2013) and Diamond Version (*Mission Statement*, 2012). The forms-in-between, the shapeless, soulless transitory species waiting to be reprogrammed by the Corporation are not losing their humanity—it was never there to begin with. The intermorphing of cheerleaders and marines in Minkin's video does not lift hope that we'll be able to become human in the future. From here it is only one step to philosopher Sadie Plant's radical proposal in the nineties for post-human porn, a half-lesbian half-machine porn, which Hester introduced as an early example of the disembodiment of the female body. Steyerl pondered what form of interspecies might emerge out of the sexual interaction between people and an animated fantasy monster, which seems to be hot nowadays in porn country. Is this the new species that will populate the new world that is hopefully going to emerge in the twenty-first century, she wondered?

What became clear over the course of these presentations is that the postdigital era calls for a re-humanization of the economic, social and technological systems. Wark warned of the romance in taking up the idea of a return to a natural state claiming there never has been a point zero. He intimated that the standard solution of going off the grid won't help anyway. As instead of becoming invisible you only attract more attention to yourself. The most urgent question that came about was therefore how to bend the point of no return into a turning point. Although the mood of the speakers and audience oscillated between nostalgia, hope, anger, frustration, fun and fear, one thing seemed absolutely tangible: this moment in history is no more and no less than a profound crisis in democracy itself. But individuals who have become the embodiment of the asymmetrical fight against mighty states and corporate powers open our eyes for us, keep on going for us, go to prison for us: Poitras and the distributors of *Citizenfour*, Snowden, Jacob Appelbaum and Glenn Greenwald alongside Sunde, Manning and many others. And recent developments like the election of anti-eviction activist and member of the indignados Ada Colau as mayor of Barcelona prove that democratic revolutions are possible as soon as the people decide to take back their institutions and democratize them. The woman who was arrested in July 2013 while occupying a bank is now in the position to invite the banks to city hall to discuss how to halt evictions.

In response to the question formulated by curators Rosalie Doubal and Steven Cairns in the opening address, "What choices do we have to exercise change?," the speakers proposed a wide range of strategies:

McKenzie Wark: let's make a new world out of the ruins of the old
Peter Sunde: let's totally fuck up the Internet and start again
Helen Hester: let's have Fun of Missing Out
Nina Power: let's stop pretending life is fun
Yuri Pattison: let's bring back the human
Ashkan Sepahvand: let's become human
Hito Steyerl: let's stop being afraid of losing control
Eleanor Saitta: let's play! let's play! let's play!

Brigitte van der Sande is an art historian, independent curator and advisor in the Netherlands. In the nineties Van der Sande started a continuing research into the representation of war in art, resulting in exhibitions like *Soft Target. War as a Daily, First-Hand Reality* in 2005 as BAK, basis voor actuele kunst in Utrecht and *War Zone Amsterdam* (2007–2009), as well as many lectures, workshops and essays on the subject within the Netherlands and abroad. In 2013–2014 she curated *See You in The Hague* at Stroom Den Haag, and co-curated *The Last Image*, an online archive on the role of informal media on the public image of death for Funeral Museum Tot Zover in Amsterdam. Van der Sande is currently working on a concept for a festival of non-western science fiction, that will take place in 2016.

Tags

Activism, Art Discourse, Media Society

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