

BA Fine Art: Studio, Site and Context

Ways of Perceiving (ADDA4023/C)

NU-TOPIA

An Exhibition Proposal by Joseph Karl Thompson

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AI ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

- I confirm that I have not used any AI tools in the research and creation of this assignment.
- I confirm that I have not presented any AI generated materials as my own work.
- I confirm that I have copies of my drafts, notes, and other resources I used, which I may be asked to provide in evidence.

The human experience is now intrinsically bound to the machinations of the technological world.

Nearly every aspect of modern society, from agriculture to industry, from leisure to the workplace, is largely governed by the use of machines, microchips and algorithms supposedly designed to enhance our quality of life yet in its implementation, both historically and in the present, technology has brought forth numerous challenges towards the way we navigate our World. Arguably, this exponential rate of advancement begins in the 18th century upon the dawn of the 'Industrial Revolution', an event that historian Peter Stearns describes as an "Intensely human experience. It's technological and organizational core.... reaching into almost every facet of society," as well as serving "Internationally as well as socially... as a magnifier of change." (Stearns, P. pg.69) This 'change' fundamentally alters the socio-political climate of 'modern' society and artists across the globe have continuously tried to gain an understanding of this ever-changing landscape via their work, be it to protest, reconcile or simply react to a World that is increasingly dictated by new technological discoveries.

'NU-TOPIA' (New - Topia) is a proposed exhibition that serves to rationalise our misgivings toward rapid technological advancement and the nefarious undercurrents of media and mass consumption through the lens of five creatives, all of whom have worked in the medium of video. Offering an exploration in over a century of videography, from the infancy of cinema to the more abstract aesthetics found in postmodern Digital, Glitch and Fluxus artworks, NU-TOPIA offers a unique viewing experience of several seminal works from acclaimed Artists and Directors including Fernand Léger, Hans Richter, Lillian F. Schwartz, Rosa Menkman and Katherine Behar.

If we take into consideration that "Prior to the industrial era, social, economic, and political change happened gradually," (Kane, C.L. pg.40) there is no reason to contend that the onset of industrialism and our abrupt transition to a more urban, mass consumerist society would've been a jarring experience for the average citizen. The first film in the exhibition, in order of chronology, highlights concern towards industrialisation at the turn of the 20th century to reflect this paradigm shift in lifestyle, and what anxieties this change sparked in the minds the public at the time.

Fernand Legers's '*Ballet mécanique*' presents this earlier insight as a frantic cacophony of moving objects, human figures and mechanical processes that despite the technological limitations given the decade in which it was created (1920s), is recognisable today as a justified critique of our transition into a consumerist, industrial society. Questioning the film's portrayal of the relationship between human and machine in her article 'Modernity and the machine in *Ballet mécanique*', author Katherine Shingler relays that the interaction between these subjects within the film can be "Suggestive of a certain anxiety around the role of the machine in modern culture and its impact on the human." And that *Ballet mécanique* bears credence to be "Recognised as a complex and nuanced attempt to explore what it is like to live in the machine age." (Shingler, K.)

Following Leger's film, the audience can expect to find another perspective from the early 20th century in Hans Richter's 'Everyday' (1929), a film that focusses less on the very rational panic surrounding industrialisation, and more so on the monotony of working-class life that emerged as a symptom of industrial society. '*Every Day*' explores a working world which is "Dull and mechanical," (Sexton, J.) and in some way parallels the mundanity of working life today, acting as a sort of precursor, arguably a warning, to the archetype of the 21st century working class. It achieves this through its depiction of the working class of 1920s Germany who are subject to a "Continual use of repetition, montage and fragmented imagery," (Sexton J.) devices which suggest an inane commitment to soulless work, and highlights how what we do for work has changed but the circumstances under which we work, namely in service to the authority of a higher class or governmental system highly invested in consumerist profit, is fundamentally unchanged.

From the early to late 20th century, several new innovations in computer and production technology expedites the process in which the life of the consumer changes.

Heralded as solutions to inefficiency and human error, computer-based systems integrated into every facet of society bring undeniable benefits to the life of the average person yet, in hindsight, bring forth an additional myriad of social, environmental and economic disparities that technology only serves to exacerbate. Fear surrounding these issues, "That the computer is intensifying... at an unprecedented speed," (Large, P. pg.131) composes the subject matter of the following works.

Produced at the start of the 70s *'Pixillation'* emulates the early films of Leger and Richter in that it bears a cloying sense of existentialism akin to pre-WW2 uncertainty yet differs in its representation of these fears, namely due to the context of the time period in which it was developed and innovations in film technology.

'Pixillation' by the late Lillian F. Schwartz represents the dread, anxiety and technophobia found in the early digital art of the 1970s. It's dark, pulsating, nauseating, and hypnotic graphics combined with a clamorous, almost mechanical soundtrack offers an overwhelming experience for the viewer and serves to tap into the themes of uncertainty towards the machine that permeate throughout the exhibition.

Schwartz was a pioneer of electronic art. It was imperative that her work be included in this exhibition given her contributions "Toward the now widespread use of computing as an analytical and interpretation tool within the disciplines of philosophy and history of art." (Gollifer, S.) *'Pixillation'* provides an example of the importance of computer art in generating discussions surrounding an array of critical theories, namely concerning our rapid transition into a computer-based society.

Film that embraces imperfection, abstraction, distortions, glitch etc serves as a form of protest to the core ideals of technology, a concept that relies upon faultless processes and precision. If we take a device or machine such as a camera, computer etc and use it in ways that produce conventionally 'undesirable' effects, errors for instance, and use these faults to produce works that a human audience can not only understand but and resonate with then we subvert the device's original intention and reclaim some of our agency. In her works 'Compress Process' and 'Rosa Moin', glitch artist Rosa Menkman utilises image and audio corruption as a means of light-heartedly combating the omniscient presence of mass media stating that "A videoscape should be a place where artists can create a new, visual ecology that can give playful feedback on the technological conventions that control the spectator in their everyday life." (Menkman, R.) This allows for an equally thought-provoking yet less alarming viewing experience for the spectator, the auditory distortions and transient patterns of low-resolution graphics providing a dreamscape of sorts, an innocuous, contemplative space to consider where the individual fits in the digital landscape of today.

The last film in this collection provides a more recognisable perspective in relation to the dangers of machine/computer-dictated society, notably in reference to internet fatigue and digital lethargy. Verging on absurdity, Katherine Behar's playful trio of shorts in the aptly titled '*Modeling big data*' portrays the current archetype of today's digitally engaged citizen; the "doomscroller". A phenomenon in which we find ourselves endlessly tapping, clicking, scrolling, and searching an assortment of algorithmically tailored apps in pursuit of any semblance of fulfilment. In Behar's own words, "Modeling Big Data" questions how computer culture favors hoarding, overproduction, and excess," (Behar, K.) a portrayal of digital gluttony and idleness that encapsulates the modern condition of apathy and what happens when we 'give up' in a digital world.

'Modeling Big Data' is yet another example of how technology influences our lives, be it through the work or leisure. It is a piece that "Seems to say; we click around online as another form of vacating or idling our lives," (Hu, T.H.) mirroring, as a comparison, the inanity of working life as seen in Richter's work, albeit through a 21st century lens. The connotations of the piece are rather depressing, yet the fleeting movements accompanied by 'cute' digital clicks and swiping sounds alongside soft-sculpture costuming evoke an undeniable coyness and whimsy that gives for a conflicted viewing experience.

Drawing upon influences found in the Fluxus movement of the 60s, as highlighted by author Tanya Shilina-Conte, the structure of the exhibition is imagined in a way which encapsulates "Immediacy and simplicity," as opposed to the "Mummifying," characteristics of the traditional gallery space (Shilina-Conte, T. pg.138). This sense of Immediacy is achievable via the medium of video and sound and in combination with the simplicity and minimalism of the proposed space, a near dystopian like quality is hoped to be conveyed. Mimicking the architectural considerations of modernist rhetoric, where theorists and philosophers of the 20th century envisioned a future of communal, city-living, the exhibition bears a cyclical layout and identical apartment-like rooms to enhance the utilitarianism of the space. Concepts for the exhibition layout can be seen in the illustrations below.

NU-TOPIA

1: *Ballet mécanique*
- Fernand Leger

2: *Everyday*
- Hans Richter

3: *Pixillation*
- Lillian F. Schwartz

4: *Compress Process*
& *Rosa Moin*
- Rosa Menkman

5: *Modeling Big Data*
- Katherine Behar

6: Artists statements,
exhibition information
etc.

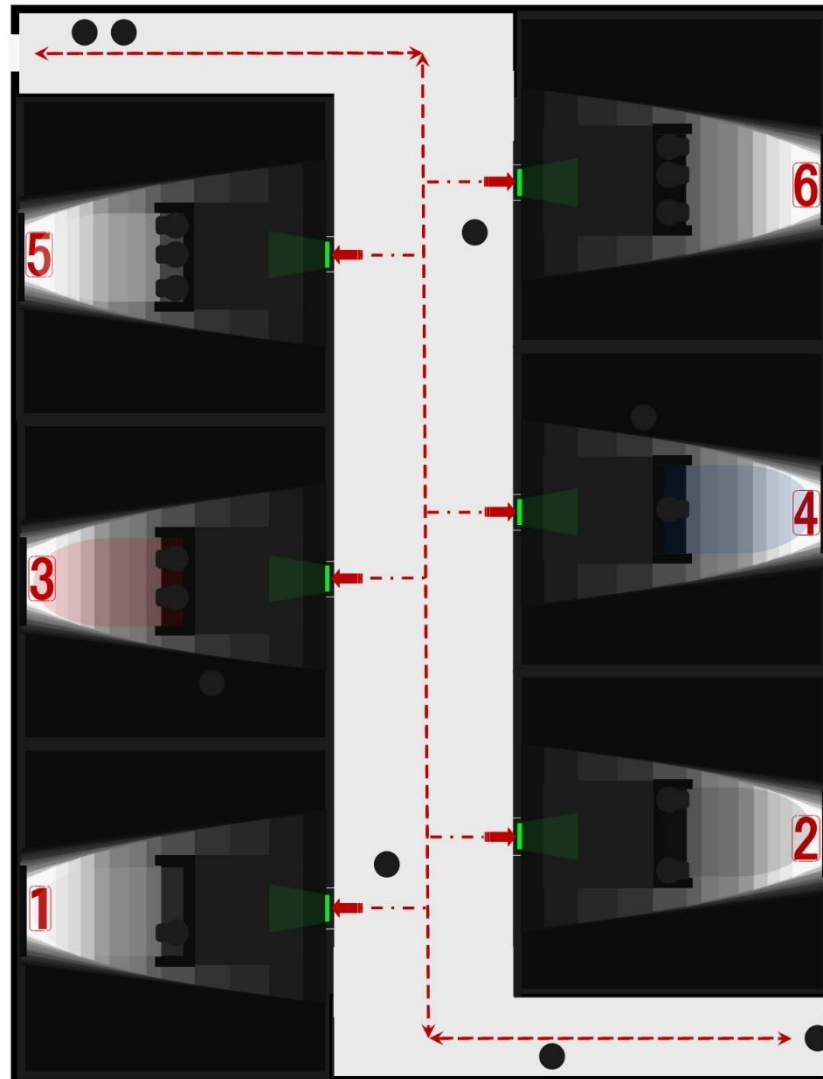


Figure 1: Theoretical Map/Layout of Exhibition

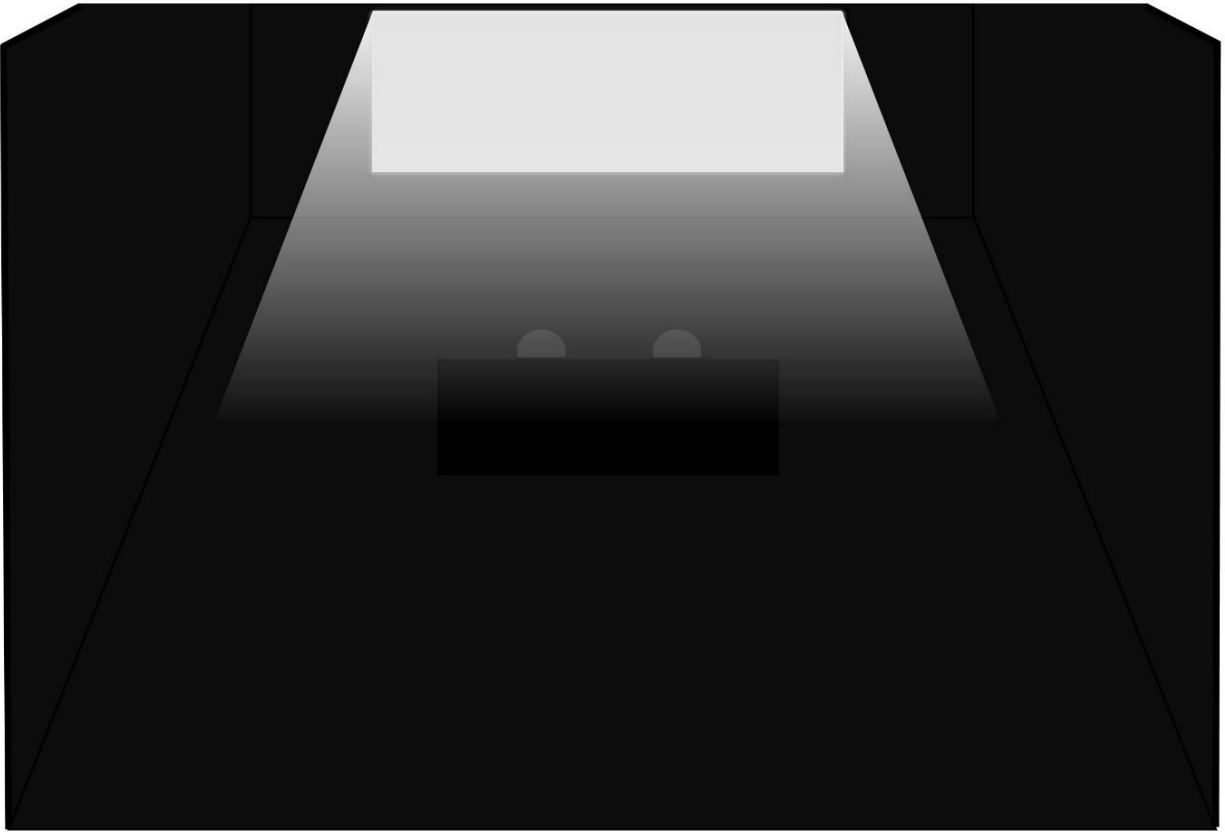


Figure 2: Concept for Room Interior

References:

Figure 1 - Self-produced

Figure 2 - Self-produced

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