

Without you I'm nothing: A trilogy

Organised by Nastja Ronkko, as part of her 6 Months Without Residency

Somerset House

28th November 2018.

Anna Bunting Branch, Rebecca James and Katriona Beales

'Are We All Addicts Now?' – an investigation into addiction by design on digital platforms.

Thank you to Nastja for inviting me. Today I'm going to give a summary of some interdisciplinary research I've undertaken over the last few years, under the umbrella name 'Are We All Addicts Now?' – in which I examine digital hyper-connectivity and the normalization of addictive behaviours through our everyday interactions with digital devices.

A bit of context

The meshing of network culture with mobile telecommunications devices – Kazys Varnelis (in his essay for the ICA catalogue *Dispersion*) identifies this as “power residing in a concentration of connectedness”. A reconfiguring of power from hierarchical structures in which the most powerful are the most distant into these rhizomatic ones in which the nodes are the repeatedly visited & the most liked. Whilst netspace was lauded by techno-utopianists because of this very redistribution (and indeed had the potential to create the brave new worlds envisaged by Tim Berners-Lee) – the colonization of netspace by tech monopolies has in many ways had the opposite effect. Google / Facebook etc. emerge as the defining political forces of the age of populism.

On an individual level we directly experience this, as, amongst other things, a reconfiguring of labour. In his book *'The Soul at Work'* Bifo Berardi does a post-marxist analysis of the transformation of labour from the factory floor to the keyboard. He describes the “constant mental electrocution of the infosphere” – which demands this permanent performance of connectedness and visibility. Research in 2016 by DSCOUT found that ON AVERAGE we touch our mobile phones over 2,600 times a day – for the heavy user that rose to over 5,400¹. Connectedness isn't an option – in the infosphere it's an economic and social necessity. Leisure is also transformed into a kind of labour – even if it's for a giant tech company. Bifo identifies panic and depression as two socio-pathological responses to these incessant demands.... Two forms of internet subjectivity perhaps... I'm interested in both the way in which panic and depression emerge as forms of resistance potentially. Depression as a withdrawal - a refusal to participate. Panic as an over-embracing, a full-blown hysteria - which is where my interest in the aesthetics of the Baroque comes in.

It's in this context that I developed 'All we all addicts now?' – born out of my own experiences of insomnia and an inability to regulate my own online behaviour. This constituted an exhibition at Furtherfield last year with Feral Practice : Fiona MacDonald, a symposium and this book edited by Vanessa Bartlett (a curator and writer specialising in researching mental health and digital culture) and Henrietta Bowden-Jones (a clinical psychiatrist and neuroscientist). I am interested in the repositioning the word addict –

¹ <https://blog.dscout.com/mobile-touches> accessed 27th November 2018

rather than accepting the model of the addict as individual who suffers from a kind of moral failure... more of a social model of addiction. As Gerald Moore writes in his contribution to the book - recent research in neuroscience moves away from the disease model of addiction – it's not about genetic defects with the brain's reward or dopamine system – or even about the hijacking of this system by a corrupting or toxic substances – but instead a universal mechanism for experiential learning carrying with it forever the potential to get caught in a negative feedback loop. I'm going to quote Moore directly "1) that, capitalism is not just about the exploitation of pleasure, but also and moreover, a social machine for the manufacture of addiction, witting or otherwise; and 2) that while this first thesis is true of all capitalism, it is particularly true of its present, digital permutation, in which the ideology of all-out "disruption" combines with... techniques of cognitive consumerism to create an industrial model based on the extraction of dopamine. Let us call this dopamining..."

In the book *Addiction by Design* by Natasha Dow Schull, Dow Schull traces the way that every detail of the environment within casinos is controlled and regulated to maximize the gamblers' time on device. In a similar way, and often using the same understandings of behavioural psychology, online platforms and apps are designed to keep the user on device. Over the last year through various revelations this knowledge has been more in the public eye. The algorithmic tailoring of content, data farming enabling personalisation - which results in a sense of being intimately known by the machine whilst simultaneously creating a series of echo chambers in which our own biases are amplified... Far from connecting these new structures of disruption are isolating us within groups of similar thinking individuals. Notifications and other gamification strategies such as collecting points or levels are common place. Neuromarketing techniques e.g. like the S point... Principle of variable reward from BF Skinner's research. All of these different techniques combine to maximize the manufacture of desire within digital capitalism....

And still I can't stop using Instagram.... increasingly the new currency of cultural capital is the luxury of being disconnected. Which brings us to Nastja's project.

Just want to end share a moving image work

[Update from the Wasteland I \(2017\)](#)

The audio is snippets from my twitter timeline.