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Out of the basement - audio tour

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For Harriet, Dagny and Hellen

Chapter 1

Dystopian novels magnify real world conflicts to create a vision of a distorted potential future. *Fahrenheit 451* portrays a world in which its inhabitants censor dissenting views and destroy knowledge not only by burning books but also by punishing inquiry and encouraging conformity through mindless hedonism. In writing *Farenheit 451*, Ray Bradbury was both inspired by and responding to the dangers he observed in the real world. Bradbury was born in 1920 and thus witnessed the radical social, political and technological changes that occurred throughout the twentieth century including the rise of communism and fascism, government sponsored censorship and eugenics programs both in the US and abroad and the transformation of entertainment and communication via advances in radio and television.

Disturbed by the McCarthy hysteria that dominated during the Cold War Era and fearing the power and influence of mass media and new technologies, Bradbury wrote *Farenheit 451* as a warning to his fellow Americans. On the inspiration for the novel, he stated “I wanted to do some sort of story where I could comment on what would happen to a country if we let ourselves go too far in this direction, where all thinking stops and the dragon swallows his tail and we sort of vanish into a limbo and we destroy ourselves by this sort of action.”1

This exhibition pulls from my latest body of work *Entartete Kunst.* Like my previous body of work, *The Sky is Falling,* the drawings, paintings and prints in this exhibition are to be understood as an anthology of related narratives. By employing this structure, I have the flexibility to explore various loosely related topics that, when understood collectively, paint a broader picture of a topic or theme. The drawings and prints of *Entartete Kunst* are encompassed by white boarders of varying sizes, evoking the pages of novels and signaling to viewers that history and literature are heavily imbedded in the conceptual framework of the series. Inspired by dystopian novels including *Animal Farm, 1984, Brave New World, Fahrenheit 451, and Atlas Shrugged*, this body of work manifests the anxiety of our contemporary politics, examining the role social media plays in manufacturing division by facilitating the isolation and polarization of its users.

Chapter 2

In the book, *The Shallows: What the internet is doing to our brains,* author Nicholas Carr details how new and historical technologies impacted the development of the human mind. For example, Carr outlines how cartography or mapmaking and the invention of the clock impacted brain development by “enhancing our capacity for conceptual thinking”2 and by “spur[ring] the adoption of a more scientific mode of thinking”3 as both technologies “placed a new stress on measurement and abstraction, on perceiving and defining forms and processes beyond those apparent to the senses.”4

Our brains are plastic, which means they can form new connections and pathways as well as break old ones. This means our brains can be dramatically impacted not only by what we learn but by what we interface with. However, plasticity is not always an advantageous trait. Carr explains that neuroplasticity plays a role in a range of mental afflictions, from depression to obsessive-compulsive disorder as the sufferer’s brain strengthens disordered circuits. So what does the author say about how the internet impacts our brain development? In short, you brain is being re-programmed.

Like the printing press, the internet is one of mankind’s crowning achievements. The internet has fundamentally revolutionized the way we gather, store and share and information and with the advent of **pocket computers**, we now have access to one of history’s most powerful tools at our fingertips. With the development of electronic mail, online discussion forums and social media, the internet has unlocked pathways for improved communication on a global scale. Indeed these tools can and are used for massive amounts of information sharing and are a net positive. Yet there is something uniquely terrifying, at least to me, about social media.

Chapter 3

Anonymity on the internet is often abused. Yet anonymity is only part of the issue. Digital communication disconnects the sender and the receiver in the communication process, facilitating the de-humanization of each party. We’ve all seen it online – messages sent with no second thought and no remorse, vicious personal attacks we would rarely make in an offline setting. For example, after the massacre in 2017 in Las Vegas that killed 58 and injured several hundred more, one twitter user commented, “lots of white trump supporters in Las Vegas at route 21 watching Jason Aldean. Pray only trumptards died! #prayforvegas.”5

In his 2017 talk at the Stanford Graduate School of Business, former Facebook executive Chamath Palihapitiya discussed how social media is purposefully designed to be addictive and not only that, it’s changing the way people communicate and interact. Technologies, applications, and products are all designed with the user in mind; with social media, platforms are designed to garner the attention and time of their users. Design decisions can be seen in how a platform functions, its branding and user interface. If we examine a feature like notification signals on platforms like Instagram and Facebook, what observations can be made? An easy one is that on both platforms, notification symbols are red. Big deal right? Why not blue though? Is this a design decision?

Before we consider the answer, let’s examine two ideas within the field of color theory – color symbolism and color analogies. The former understands colors as having the ability to become symbolic, representing a belief or abstract idea. For example, in David Hornung’s *Color: a workshop for artists and designers,* the author states that color symbolism is “generally not the result of a spontaneous psychological response to observed color, but rather a learned connection bound by time and place. In the West, for example, yellow can signify cowardice. In 14th century Japan, however, warriors wore a yellow chrysanthemum as a pledge of their courage.”6 If color symbolism is a learned connection, color analogues are “associated with specific psychological responses that seem more intuitively based”7 like the idea of warm and cool colors. In examining how red has both innate characteristics as well as symbolic connotations, we can begin to see that red is a loaded color choice. Red the color of stop signs and warning signals. Red the color of fire and rage. Color is a cue here and its use elicits a response from the user to pay attention.

There’s obviously much more to be said about the deliberateness of the design choices of platforms but I want to turn instead to what Palihapitiya says about the impact of social media on how people interact both on and offline. He states, “If you feed the beast, that beast will destroy you. If you push back on it, we have a chance to control it and reign it in. And it is a point in time where people need to make a hard break from some of these tools and the things that you rely on. The short term dopamine driven feedback loops that we have created are destroying how society works. No civil discourse, no cooperation, misinformation, mistruth and it’s not an American problem…this is a global problem. It is eroding the core foundation of how people behave by and between each other.”8 I don’t mean to sound like Chicken Little (then again my last body of work was entitled *THE SKY IS FALLING)* but maybe we should began critically examining these tools, how we engage with them and their lasting effects not only on our social fabric but on our minds.

Chapter 4

Game theory is used across disciplines including by mathematicians, economists, psychologists, political scientists and biologists to understand the math behind strategic decisions made by rational actors. Game theory sounds academic but it’s application can be

extended into the every day. If you watch reality competitions or sports, chances are you’re more adept at thinking about game theory than you might realize. If a game is just the set of rules that define it, then game theory can be applied to help illuminate strategies, players and payoff. Because extending the metaphor of the game can stimulate interesting lines of questioning, what observations do we make about social media when we ask “what is the game?”

 In the piece *Feed Me* Eric Weinstein, a mathematician and economist, discusses the ability of humans to consciously opt in and out of games; he states, “The really interesting thing about humans is we are the only species that understands what game we are in and we can reject the game. Every other species is [stuck] playing the game.”9 When it comes to social media, I believe that isolation and polarization are built into the fabric of the way these tools function. And while these tools can be useful overall, I’m finding more and more of an urge to voluntarily opt out… or at least I’m trying to.

Chapter 5

In *The Shallows*, Nicholas Carr outlines attention restoration theory or ART, stating, “a series of psychological studies over the past twenty years has revealed that after spending time in a quiet rural setting, close to nature, people exhibit greater attentiveness, stronger memory, and generally improved cognition. Their brains become both calmer and shaper. The reason, according to ART, is that when people aren’t being bombarded by external stimuli, their brains, in effect relax. They no longer have to tax their working memories by processing a stream of bottom-up distractions. The resulting state of contemplativeness strengthens their ability to control their mind.”10 Sounds easy enough to implement right? But when, if ever, do we hold ourselves accountable for the time we spend on our phones? It’s an easy enough observation to make for yourself. Go out to any restaurant, stand in any line, or even look over at a stoplight as you’ll see it, people on their “phones.” This goes beyond the scope of social media but it still begs the question, how much is too much? Are we respecting these tools or abusing them? Furthermore, are we giving our brains the time they need to process and recuperate?

There is little doubt in my mind that we are living through one of the most politically polarized epochs of American history. Hanlon’s razor advises us to “never attribute to malice that which is adequately explained by stupidity” but it’s advice we do not heed. Instead we assume the worst intentions of our “political rivals” and refuse to acknowledge our own complicity in almost any problem. We end relationships based on politics and wish death upon our brothers and countrymen. Online the rhetoric reaches epic levels of vitriol and while I recognize that this is the law of the land in the comment section of YouTube, I question how this type of act corrupts both the mind and the soul.

I do not believe we can bridge divides when we are constantly outraged. I do not think we can practice tolerance when we allow ourselves to be goaded into playing politics or defending party lines. And I know we cannot make astute observations or see nuance in the world if we continually and voluntarily blind ourselves by the glaring white light of our devices. I return to the question about the ways in which we are programming ourselves and I shudder at our behavior and like Bradbury and other authors, I believe I see sinister forces brewing in the world that present enormous potential dangers to our future.

Chapter 6

“We’re going to build a mirror factory first and put out nothing but mirrors for the next year and take a long look in them.”11

Fahrenheit 451

Endnotes

1. “Ticket to the Moon: a tribute to SciFi” (mp3). *Biography in Sound*. Narrated by Norman Rose. NBC Radio News. December 4, 1956. 27:10–27:57. Retrieved March 14, 2019, [https://oldradioprograms.us/My%20Old%20Radio%20Shows/B/Biographies%20In%20Sound/Biographies%20In%20Sound%20(NBC)-1956-12-04-Ticket%20To%20The%20Moon%20-%20Tribute%20To%20Scifi.mp3](https://oldradioprograms.us/My%20Old%20Radio%20Shows/B/Biographies%20In%20Sound/Biographies%20In%20Sound%20%28NBC%29-1956-12-04-Ticket%20To%20The%20Moon%20-%20Tribute%20To%20Scifi.mp3)
2. Nicholas Carr, *The Shallows: what the internet is doing to our brains* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2010), 45.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. @theResistANNce, “Lots of white trump supporters in Las Vegas at route 21 watching Jason Aldean. Pray only trumptards died! #prayforvegas,” October 2, 2017 12:53am, (tweet).
6. David Hornung, *Color: a workshop for artists and designers* (London: Lawrence King Publishing, 2005), 123.
7. Ibid, 124.
8. Chamath Palihapitiya, “View From The Top” (presentation, Stanford Graduate School of Business, Stanford, CA, November 13, 2017). 22:28 – 23:18, Accessed March 14, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PMotykw0SIk>
9. Joe Rogan and Eric Weinstein, “1203: Joe Rogan Experience – Eric Weinstein.” November 16, 2018, produced by Joe Rogan and Jamie Vernon, podcast, MP3 audio, 2:11:44 – 2:11:58, accessed March 14, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X9JLij1obHY&t=10168s>
10. Carr, 222.
11. Ray Bradbury, *Fahrenheit 451, 60th Anniversary Edition* (New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 2013), 164.

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“What is game theory and what are some of its applications,” *Scientific American,* June 2, 2003, <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/what-is-game-theory-and-w/>