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Low Grade Euphoria

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Folie a Deux Split Screen: <https://vimeo.com/268042209> Shop With Me on MagnaVision™: <https://vimeo.com/268042677> Folie a Deux Exhibition
View: <https://vimeo.com/268042996>

Low Grade Euphoria

The intersection of the digital realm and daily life is where I set the work in my exhibition *Low Grade Euphoria*. “America was there before the screen was invented, but everything about the way it is today suggests it was invented with the screen in mind.”¹ When Jean Baudrillard observed this about our country in 1989, he could not have known exactly how prescient his statement actually was. If America was invented around the screen, then we have become even more primed since the invention of television for the screen ubiquity of today. Looking back on the last 30 years, the acceleration of screen technology into daily life, on more portable platforms, has been nearly seamless, from smartphones to tablets to HD cameras.

Somewhere in the mid-2000’s, I began feeling a fatigue with technology—mostly because I was staring at a screen all day as a digital photographer—and started to question what our rapid adoption of screen-based technology was doing to personal identity, interpersonal relationships, and how screens affect our daily routines as average consumers and workers. Since then, I believe the interaction between humans and technology has only become more absurd, ridiculous, and numbing. From smartphones to virtual reality headsets, we have been sold the idea that by using the newest screens we will augment our lives with faster and more dazzling access to what we desire, that we can *get* or *be* whatever we want. According to artist Hito Steyerl, digital consumerism produces, “images (that) trigger mimetic desires and make people want to become like the products represented in them.”² The iPhoneX, Apple’s newest phone, is advertised this way on their website:

Our vision has always been to create an iPhone that is entirely screen. One so immersive the device itself disappears into the experience. And so intelligent it can respond to a tap, your voice, and even a glance. With iPhone X, that vision is now a reality. Say hello to the future.³

Apple's phone apparently allows the user and device to become one, the device "disappearing" so users can have a seamless and immersive experience with high-definition digital reality. But the euphoria we might feel from such an experience is tempered by the actuality of our interaction with screens. These portals with which we now interact seem to provide more of a gateway to mundane activities like shopping or social media—lower-grade experiences than what Apple wants to sell. Whatever people seek through these portals is certainly not inconsequential to our identities now; rather how we interact with screens is shaping our daily lives in absurd ways, altering the way we behave, and forming a hybrid reality made up of digital images and products produced specifically for screen-mediated consumerism.

In the exhibit I have produced two large projections on adjoining walls that make up one digital video piece titled *Folie a Deux* (a psychological term meaning "shared delusion"). The characters look somewhat awkward using the inexpensive Google Cardboard virtual reality devices, blinded from the world around them, totally absorbed by what they view on their headsets. In their actual reality, we watch as they go about repetitive routines of nutrition and fitness, using gadgets and gizmos from As Seen on TV™ infomercials and internet marketing, apparently trying to improve themselves while drained of affect by their screens, and completely disconnected from one another. With access to so much imagery the characters seem bored and automatic, even programmed.

As early as the 19th century, Physician George M. Beard recognized a peculiar, neurotic state of being related to increasing industrial production. Naming it "neurasthenia", he recognized the condition as a byproduct of fast-paced living, causing paralysis and insomnia, among other ailments."⁴ Kevin Aho, examining social philosopher Georg Simmel's work on boredom as a by-product of modern life, explains:

“Boredom emerges insidiously as we are busily occupied with our workaday routines...the result is an inability to distinguish which activity actually matters to us... (so) if family obligations, work, exercise, shopping, and dining must all be efficiently performed within an increasingly compressed schedule, then it becomes difficult to identify which of these activities is more meaningful or significant than others. In our heightened state of nervous indifference all of our choices take on an equal significance; we do not have a strong emotional reaction to any of them.”⁵

The lack of affect, or boredom, the characters display in *Folie a Deux* could actually be a symptom of over-stimulation. Inability to discern what is meaningful or important might result in a ridiculous evening crunching on orange Taco Bell tacos while “crunching” abdominal muscles with ab-rollers in the the living room. The edits within *Folie a Deux* work to push the viewer to stay with the imagery and characters for drawn out periods of time on either projection, although the piece is just over 5 minutes long. Because our attention spans are challenged in the digital age, the edits I’ve chosen to make, at times, feel like an eternity. The audio in *Folie a Deux* goes along with what is seen in the video but is amplified; a spoon pushing Jell-O around a plate, the crunching of tacos in the *Taco Night* sequence, and the whirring of the bullet blender later in the video, are meant to be grating. At times, the sound breaks the monotony of the long sequences or indicates something is changing—for example when the characters become pixelated an ominous sound plays along with their state-change. I purposely set *Folie a Deux* in a home from the 1950s, and have used music created in the spirit of 1980’s synth pop in two scenes to reference and bring together eras that were influential points in how pop culture envisioned the technological future. Some of the objects and foods the characters interact with are from fitness and food concepts that originated in prior decades, while some are contemporary. As technology has advanced a great deal in my own lifetime, I have been considering how society envisioned the future in the past, along with how technology functions in in the present.

Google Cardboard®, NutriBullet®, ThighMaster®, the Doritos® Locos Taco (see Appendix B, product image key), and trends like “athleisure” (fig.1), to name just a few products that I’ve used in the exhibition, are evidence of identity embraced through product imagery. We can easily buy a new product on our phone in a couple of seconds, access self-improvement advice from an internet search, have almost any kind of food delivered, or watch a simulation through a Google headset. It’s not really new that we consume from screens—infomercials and television ads have been around for decades (the ThighMaster debuted in 1992), but the multitude of devices we use, products we consume, and the speed of access and delivery has accelerated.⁶ If we believe in the promise of new technology (its ubiquity suggests that we do) and purchase the requisite devices and products, then perhaps we can achieve any lifestyle that appeals to us. In the *Shop With Me on MagnaVision™* video I explore the multiple ways we shop and are advertised to simultaneously, in person and in digital space, but always mediated by a screen. The device through which the phone is magnified is another As Seen on TV™ product called MagnaVision™, a portable plastic device that holds a cell phone, providing hands-free magnification. The devices in both *Folie a Deux* (Google Cardboard) and *Shop with Me on MagnaVision™*, require a cell phone to use. The cell phone is a key device in the commentary I’m making because of its ubiquity and portability, yet various screens and projection technologies are used in the exhibition for effect on the viewer, to capitalize on this specific gallery space, and to create a feeling of altered reality which encompasses the viewer with *Folie a Deux*. In the room with MagnaVision, a more personal yet encompassing experience takes place with the feeling of being in a store, listening with headphones to amplified binaural beats while watching a first-person shopping experience, and being faced with a smaller screen that must be reconciled on a personal scale.

Screen technology has successfully infiltrated our experience with video (including virtual reality), .gifs, stock photography, image spam, Google images, and more. Product/stock photography is ubiquitous on the web, and has no doubt shaped our visualization of different products and concepts, and of photography itself. As Susan Sontag writes in *On Photography*, “In teaching us a new visual code, photographs alter and enlarge our notions of what is worth looking at and what we have a right to observe.”⁷ Sontag is speaking on pre-digital photographic imagery, but how digital photography functions online is relevant to the discussion of how we interact with screen-based imagery now. Google image searches produce some of the most basic and decontextualized imagery in existence, products and people (or parts of people) floating in space on white backgrounds. Instead of enlarging our knowledge, these images allow us to shrink away from careful interpretation. Paul Frosh writes, “Stock photography represents an exemplary standardization and systematization of photographic practices... an abstraction of photographic images as exchangeable signs and cultural commodities.”⁸ This type of standardized image has, in many cases, become the de facto signifier for a product or an idea because they are what appear from a Google search, aggregated from millions of web pages, easy to access from a screen. In the wall of photographs displayed in the gallery, I am playing with the idea of digital representation by exposing pixels as the foundation of this imagery, and also in a sense exposing the myth of photographic truth as it pertains to Google image search results. Stock images in .gif form pop up in *Shop With Me on MagnaVision™*, as well in sequences of *Folie a Deux*. Stock Google imagery is an easy conduit for consumers’ identities to become enmeshed with the products we search out. Curiously, an image search for “burpee” or “banana” result in similar photographs (fig. 2). I imagined the characters in *Folie a Deux* becoming stock images; transformed via pixilation in the printed photographs on the wall, and as

instructional fitness posters in the exercise room of the exhibition. The characters don't exist in real life in the exhibit, only as digital imagery.

Hito Steyerl alludes to the possibility for another kind of digital transformation in her video *How Not to Be Seen: A Fucking Didactic .MOV File*. For Steyerl, the goal is to teach us how to disappear from representation using the tactics of digital editing, as she contends we have already been “represented to pieces”⁹ in the digital era. In her essay, “The Spam of the Earth: Withdrawal from Representation”, Steyerl describes the peculiar life of image spam disseminated via the web:

Dense clusters of radio waves leave our planet every second. Our letters and snapshots, intimate and official communications, TV broadcasts and text messages drift away from earth in rings, a tectonic architecture of the desires and fears of our times (1). In a few hundred thousand years, extraterrestrial forms of intelligence may incredulously sift through our wireless communications. But imagine the perplexity of those creatures when they actually look at the material. Because a huge percentage of the pictures inadvertently sent off into deep space is actually spam. Any archaeologist, forensic, or historian—in this world or another—will look at it as our legacy and our likeness, a true portrait of our times and us. Imagine a human reconstruction somehow made from this digital rubble. Chances are, it would look like image spam.¹⁰

In the essay, Steyerl ultimately argues that people can, and will, be bold enough walk away from this kind of representation and live free, disappearing from representation, and image spam will not be an accurate representation of humanity, regardless of who sees it in the future. However, the pixel is the atomic matter of digital reality, and whoever controls and manipulates the pixel has the power. If we give the power of representation to the digital world (i.e. Google), even in small amounts, I believe our experience of reality can be altered by that quantity.

Of course it is ironic that I have created almost all of the work in the exhibition entirely digitally. Digital image manipulation has allowed me to create all the imagery in

the exhibit, from the video and special effects to the digitally printed photographs. All of the products featured in the exhibit can be ordered online. To be able to create digitally, and simultaneously critique our relationship with this technology, has deepened my understanding of the role of artist working in digital media, and as a technology consumer in daily life. Video art has a history of cultural critique, "...the early uses of portable video technology represented a critique of the institutions of art in Western culture... Thus, video posed a challenge to the sites of art production... to forms and "channels" of delivery, and to the passivity of reception built into them."¹¹

In addition to the critique of screen based technology and imagery, I've also found it useful to contextualize the image saturated digital world we live in now as a continuation of the Spectacle first described by Guy Debord in 1968.¹² Updating Debord's theses, media theorist McKenzie Wark describes the spectacle of today as *disintegrated*.¹³ He likens the modern spectacle to the bits of consumer plastic floating and disintegrating in the ocean vortices; the plastic never totally becomes one with the water, yet the bits, as they disintegrate, become too tiny to perceive. This conceptualization, in the context of my work, references the inability of the characters to see outside their immersive digital experience to have any critical perspective. The consequence of digitally enhanced consumerism is that there are not only tiny bits of plastic clogging our oceans, but image pixels clogging our minds, building up like plaque, taking up space that more important imagery, or memories of real experiences, might inhabit. As Wark points out, "When the US Food and Drug Administration announced that widely prescribed sleeping pills would come with strong warnings about strange behavior, they were not only responding to reports of groggy people driving their cars or making phone calls, but also purchasing items over the internet."¹⁴ The infiltration of digital images, especially in terms of

consumerism, is now deep enough in the human psyche that we can be nearly unconscious and still shop using our screens.

In creating this exhibition, I began to see my work in conversation with several contemporary video artists who create absurd, unusual, and disturbing environments using video along with everyday objects and scenery, and whose work represents the digital-consumerism zeitgeist. Alex Da Corte's installations and video are contemporary post-pop visions of the everyday objects and domestic scenery we usually take comfort in yet, "The garish nature of presentation is...further exaggerated by the ominous glow of the neon fixtures, distorting semblances of domesticity – plastic food and cartoonish ornaments evoke nostalgia in a way that is almost nightmarish (Fig. 3)."¹⁵ In the exercise room of my installation, I use readymade fitness devices seen in my videos (and that people may have seen marketed on an infomercial or the internet) to invite the viewer to participate with instruction from the stock image posters. I collected most of these items by asking friends on Facebook if they had fitness devices they'd be willing to lend me, and items purchased online and at Wal-Mart round out the display in the room. Da Corte has stated his affinity for common products as transformational elements in his work, often collected from thrift stores, flea markets and grocery stores. Of items he's found at big-box stores, Da Corte says, "To me, these things are like meeting your heroes, like meeting the stars in the movies you've just seen. They make me happy."¹⁶ A ThighMaster brings a certain amount of joy to many, I think, especially as it is removed from its packaging, still possessing all the promise of thigh transformation.¹⁷ In mass consumerism, the magic of a new product can be lost quickly as these colorful gems of the mass market become part of a routine. Still, I think they possess a potential energy that can be tapped, and that can be transformed by placing them in a gallery. I particularly like the setting under the harsh fluorescent lights that remain in the Neri

gallery from when the space was part of an Office Max. In the exercise room I want people to feel compelled to play with or use the devices, or at least recognize it as a version of a gym one might find in an auxiliary room of a hotel or office.

Video artist Mika Rottenburg has cited Ron Popeil infomercials she saw on TV as a child as inspiration for the wacky devices and scenarios featured in her work.¹⁸ Rottenburg is calling attention to late capitalism and labor in her films, but the serious subject matter is partly disguised with absurd and circuitous plots, spectacular looking actors, and inventive gizmos that aid the characters with their work (fig. 4) Growing up with television and then internet mass-marketing, consumers of my generation have been exposed to a constant barrage of colorful and almost unbelievable product imagery, convinced it can change our lives and revolutionize our experience, whether it's getting a body with hard abs, a sleek pair of thighs, or becoming the king of barbecue chicken. These products exist on a screen first, and then make their way into our homes. They are conspicuous components of our hybrid reality, and increasingly available to us through our screens.

Lastly, I have experienced an attraction/repulsion that is quite enjoyable from viewing Ryan Trecartin's videos on Vimeo, and his work was in my mind as I created *Shop With Me on MagnaVision™*, as I spliced together the intense audio with the visuals. Trecartin's cast of characters, and the bizarre scenarios they act out, say a lot about the zeitgeist from which he draws his material. A New Yorker profile on Trecartin explains:

Trecartin came of age when new technologies were changing the way we look at moving images—from the big screen to laptops and iPhones, from network to cable and broadband streaming—and the Internet was messing with our brains. He sees himself as a “bridge” person, someone who grew up before the revolution in digital technology, whose effects are now second nature to the generation that was born into it. His work is not about technology or social media, he has said, but about how the Internet changes the way we relate to the world and to one another, and his videos are rooted in the very world these changes have brought

about. It is a place of multiple individual narratives unfolding simultaneously, of shifting identities and genders, of triumphant consumerism, and of young people yacking maniacally into cell phones, breaking windows and furniture, and saying things like “The world ended three weeks ago, starting now,” or “I exist because of Command V...Don’t ignore ignore me me me me.”¹⁹

In Trecartin’s world, digital existence is fast-paced, exhilarating and disturbing, yet mesmerizing. There’s a hypnotic quality to watching so much action and fast editing, looping, and hearing so much dialogue all taking place in a simulacrum of someone’s living room, bedroom, or back yard. These characters seem a lot like us, but hopefully they’re not (fig 5). Trecartin’s work shows the overstimulation aspect of the digital/reality hybrid, at the opposite end of static stock imagery and long video sequences, but of the same family of internet-searchable content that tries to represent what we are now. If we are at all worried about humankind’s relationship with digital media, I think Trecartin irreverently suggests that we should be, a point underlying my thesis work. Trecartin makes much of his content available for free via the video-sharing platform Vimeo, which is unusual for a video artist who also shows in museums and biennales, and a practice I think is necessary to find a larger audience of consumers on the web, an audience for which his troubling twist on digital reality could potentially have great impact on outside the museum.

I think about the issues of digital consumerism against the backdrop of an American suburban space, “between utopia and dystopia”, and, “dream and nightmare”.²⁰ This is the suburbia envisioned in photographer Gregory Crewdson’s highly staged tableaux, which evoke a certain horror of the unknown; the kind that takes place in dimly lit living rooms. In plate 43 of Crewdson’s series *Beneath the Roses*, an old man in a bathrobe stares into the light emanating from a television screen in an otherwise dark room (fig 6). We can’t see what the man is

watching, just that the screen seems central to his existence at that moment, casting an eerie glow on his pale flesh. David Lynch, whose work often acts to disturb the façade of the American suburban tableau, said of his film *Blue Velvet*'s iconic opening sequence, "This is the way America is to me. There's a very innocent, naïve quality to life, and there's a horror and a sickness as well."²¹ In my work, I want to pose that the sickness may now manifest more in our interactions with the digital world, perhaps that we have too readily accepted technology as naïve consumers, swimming too easily with our eyes through endless pixels of imagery. Perhaps the horror is in the subtle ways we exchange our humanity daily for convenience, as we become more automatic, transfixed by the pixels on our screens.

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