

SAME, SAME

TECH,



DRUGS,

Our complex relationship with technology, but also our perception of what it even means, is explored in ‘Systems of Belief’ a new exhibition in Graz, Austria. It’s strongest when considering what technology means in art, going so far to suggest that technology now is not that different to what drugs were then – at least when it comes to matters of the mind.

As soon as I hear that word ‘Technology’ I have already defined it. The small screen of pixels burning a hole in my pocket, constantly cries out for my attention. “Turn right on Burging street,” my google maps blurts out as I reach the Hellenistic architecture of HALLE FÜR KUNST gallery in Graz, Austria, the setting for one of the most probing exhibitions included in the *Steirischer Herbst* ’22 festival.

Systems of Belief was curated by Cathrin Mayer and the collage of different works she presents shatters our modern, one-dimensional approach to technology, leaving us with the question: Is technology better understood as a tool or a toy?

“You have reached your destination,” the automated voice informs me.

“Technology is something which can be used for bad things, like war, but it can also be used for interesting and ambiguous things,” Mayer says. “I am very interested in the experimentation and seeing how these technologies can be used. It might be catastrophic, but it might be brilliant.”

Mayer discloses this to me through a pixelated metaphysical meeting room. It feels strangely appropriate, as we discuss the process behind this carefully curated collage of different works. This multi-layered exhibition reinterprets our limited definition of technology as an instrument to reach a finite destination.

Mayer explores generations of tech usage, showing how our modern desire to place science, logic, maths and.... well technology into their own boxed up and neatly labelled sections has become obsolete. Cleverly breaking down binaries such as science and religion, altered experiences and generational divides, Mayer accepts the danger and pain technology can cause. But she also chooses to focus this exhibition on how tech has been used, both past and present, in a variety of ways to create.

The exhibition connects nine seemingly incongruous artists, both old and young, into a multimedia collage of canvas, media, and sculpture. I begin my journey through the exhibition with my own metaphysical borders in place.

“Technology has this ability to make things more efficient, but it also has the ability to create,” Mayer says in reference to technology’s double-edged sword. Much of our modern ideas around technology obsess over the ability to enhance productivity. People have become consumed by these utopian uses of tech as nothing more than tools of efficiency. The exhibition re-focuses our attention on the creative power of technology, and how it allows artists to depict these ‘different states’.

Many people might gaze back at the tech-free world with a nostalgic tear. The human desire to compartmentalise and categorise are feelings drugs, technology and art can create. But Mayer points out how technology actually supplements the artistic depictions of the mind-altering effects drugs such as LSD provide. These technologies enable an ontological exploration, whereby we can look at the world through someone else’s eyes.

I enter through the curtains and into my first experience. *‘THIRD EYE BUTTERFLY’* (1964) is an experimental film by Storm de Hirsch. “Storm is a woman who was influ-

Storm De Hirsch, *THIRD EYE BUTTERFLY*



ential in film making, yet she has been completely forgotten,” Mayer says. “I wanted to start the show in a symbolic sense as well, with a great woman artist.”

This work is closely interlinked with the 60s drug scene, encapsulated in the story of experimentation with the mind. Ever since the Western world began taking substances such as LSD and ecstasy, we began experimenting and altering our minds.

“Drugs are also a kind of technology,” Mayer says. Whether it is through the computer process or taking LSD and going into the world, it is all intertwined. Technology provides an insight into getting closer and closer to what experience is.”

Hirsch uses fragmentary frames to depict the mind-altering states she experienced, but with a childish lens, directly painting onto the raw film to create a tunnel view.

“It is very important to look at history through the lens of young people,” says Mayer. “I think that is a very interesting conversation. I very much wanted the paintings

from different generations to be suspended in a kind of dialogue.”

De Hirsch’s film flows silently into the work of Antonia De La Luz Kašić, a contemporary artist based in Graz. The amalgamation between mechanical tools and the unmechanical method of using them subverts our idea of ‘technology’, offering insight into the other side of its double-edged definition, the creative side.

Kašić’s kaleidoscopic films are unique thanks to the ways in which she utilises and manipulates the camera. By deconstructing the film camera, Kašić uses mirrors to create a Kaleidoscopic effect, not dissimilar to a cardboard Kaleidoscope used by a child. Rather than distorting images using purely technological equipment as we would imagine a 21st century artist might do, Mayer explains how “Today you think about only digital means of alteration, but then Kašić (a contemporary artist) came up with something that I think is so interesting, especially in relation to Storm De Hirsch. I put them in one line to show this inversion in a generation.”

The exhibition pursues these types of back and forth dialogues. It bundles together contemporary and old-fashioned artists, such as De Hirsch and Kašić and subverts our obsession with technology as futuristic while shining a light on how it has been used creatively for generations to capture experiences. Not just as a tool to increase efficiency, we have to remember to remove this modernistic and oppressive lens that technology has become jaded with.

This line between De Hirsch and Kašić not only alerts us to yet another woman artist who has been greatly unappreciated but forms a multigenerational dialogue.

The conceptual similarities between De Hirsch and Kašić’s processes of production are perplexing, they change the norms of what is expected of an artist in the now. Mayer’s subtle link between the two generations draws a connection showing technology does not have to be productive or destructive, it can, and was, simply used to create.

While De Hirsch’s fragmentary film work is an emblem of the 60s drug culture, Kašić’s fragmented street shots remind me of our own, ever-growing multiplicity of selves. The different social media personalities we have. Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp all with different accounts, different fragments, and versions of the self. As time moves on, we become more like the broken streets in Kašić’s film.

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It is this word 'spectrum' that strikes a chord with me. It highlights how both Laffoley, and Scott Perry create works sit in the same world, and how the world in a larger sense is all connected. If not by the invisible lines of broadband, then by the more chaotic artistic connections.

In this exhibition each of the different works, whether canvas, collage, film or sculpture remind us of what it means to be human, our experience and state of being. This is what gives them the power to break these borders we have erected in our minds.

In reminding ourselves that technology can be used to complement art we are able to reach a deeper understanding. How we choose to judge and process our experiences creates societal differences, not the experiences themselves. Perhaps if we can understand how others perceive the world, we will realise we are all connected by a singular backbone. We are all human.

The current is strong as I saunter along the river Mur. Right in the centre of the water an artificial tsunami rises and falls, frozen in motion. Murinsel, the man-made island situated in Graz, is just one of the strange and utopian elements which pepper the city. There is, perhaps, no better place for this exhibition to be held. The prominently futuristic architecture, slotting so gracefully into the conventional baroque Austrian houses. Both tradition and modernity thrive.

"Graz does not have to fulfil this tourist ideal," says Mayer. "It provides a very nice freedom."

The city seems to have reached a peaceful equilibrium that understands the importance of the past, whilst also allowing the emergence of the future. A borderless city, the perfect spot for an exhibition

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aimed at deconstructing Western boundaries.

Just like the architecture of the city, within the exhibition (if we turn off our phones and allow ourselves to truly experience it) we witness both technological and traditional practices intertwining.

"Technology is a way to access different states of mind and enabling these different minds is, for me, technology, it provides an insight into getting closer and closer to what experience is," says Mayer.

'Systems of Belief' creates a dialogue between the elements of the world we often perceive as dichotomous. The result? It allows for a greater understanding and realisation that our rigid definition of 'technology' can be shattered by the artistic abilities of art and technology, giving space for technology to take on a new definition.

A technological backbone runs throughout 'Systems of Belief' and has been running throughout artistic practices for decades. Over time, the definition of technology has just become lost in translation, and it is Mayer who unites us with the creative side of technology once more.

As I leave the exhibition, I switch my phone to silent. Closing down my Google Maps, I continue my onward journey using my device as nothing more than a creative way to experience and capture the city. <

The technological fiefdom, Silicon Valley, is deeply rooted within the era of drug experimentation. The majority of the internet was born out of these altered states, for example Steve Jobs openly discussed how LSD enhanced his creativity. How is Silicon Valley relevant to this exhibition? It also marks the moment in which we began erecting an oppressive 'efficiency bubble' around technology. This is the very definition which Mayer seeks to deconstruct and moves us towards technology's experiential ability, and it's creative ability to capture these experiences.

The title of the exhibition 'Systems of Belief' is a juxtaposition. A gentle balance between labels. The exhibition also features a deep dive into the binary topic of science and religion.

As I pass through the darkness of De Hirsch's film and into the light, I am struck initially by Lee Scratch Perry's chaotic installation entitled *FLOOD SUN, 2020*; a collage of materiality. However, more striking was Paul Laffoley's work.

Pistis Sophia is an encapsulating religious canvas-collage of a person with two hands held in prayer. This

is a well-known depiction often found in Renaissance Italy. I then think nothing more of the work, already compartmentalising it as a religious work.

"Paul Laffoley was very influenced by science (which is a kind of technology), so I think technology has always been part of artistic production," Mayer says, "but now I think we only think about what technology and systems can do in the future."

It is only minutes later, as I study Paul's paintings, that I realise, these are not religious in the way I

thought. I was, again, lost in my own pre-judgement. The work is precise, akin to the process of science. This was fully evidenced in his work *The House of the Selves*, an analytical scientific chart, littered with religious elements instead of the well-known chemical elements.

"It is important in my shows that I exhibit artists who are not that visible or who have been forgotten," says Mayer. "With Lee Scott Perry that is definitely the case, and yes, they (Lee Scott Perry and Paul Laffoley) are very different, but they are also on the same spectrum."

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