We All Got Our Heads In The Cloud

Sandra Petrasevic

In the original notion of the sublime (in the Enlightenment always associated with phenomena in nature) perception and experience correlated with the inability of its representation, given the encountered vastness or complexity. Kant's 'momentary inhibition of vital forces', a disruption in the form of simultaneous, conflictive affects such as enthusiasm and terror, emphasizes the paradox of the subject's belonging to and, in order to be truly human, separation from nature. The same otherness is to be found in our relationship with technology (although the generative role is reversed) as our own product exceeds us, rendering us impotent and insignificant in the face of its, indeed, perfectly calculable structure but disconcerting, seemingly bottomless potential. The contemporary sublime rears its head mostly in cases of failure: a technological stutter, a glitch, a slowing down or loss of connection, these are not only instances in which technology is annulling its own fundamental raison d'être, we are additionally frustrated by

the realization of our own powerlessness and inability to grasp the complexity of the basics of the technologies we use on a daily basis. A good example of the contradictory liaison we hold with technological otherness is The Cloud, which features both a familiar territory we can use to accelerate, unclutter and organize our life in reach of a parcel within, as well as an immensity that forbids a layperson's understanding and ignorance regarding the particularities of its operational apparatus. Well known is the authority that algorithms have over our decision-making process by us having unpreparedly outsourced our agency regarding control about what information could be relevant and interesting to us. Corollary, the limited assortment of information we are to choose from, determined via behavioral profiling, has a direct and profound impact on our choices in the 'real' sphere.

The epistemic function of the Internet turns out to have not lived up to its promise of our empowerment, despite the democratization of knowledge. With the coming abolition of cash and handwriting, we are collectively disinherited of the right to secrets. By virtue of spelling convenience, we willingly overlook the disadvantageous transference of our power to algorithms, of which Peter Jellitsch is acutely aware. Through measuring and recording the strength of wireless signals, processed into diagrams to be further translated into fragmented, abstracted and repetitious drawings somewhat reminiscent of topological maps, Jellitsch seems to attempt the dismantling of the mysteries of the electromagnetic field whereby virtual data is spread and wherein all matter, including our bodies, is immersed at any given moment. Jellitsch produces a visual analogue of the imperceptible that deflates and accentuates the potentially terrifying aspects of what goes on within this plane, while it ostends a subjective mode on the new premise of being 'soaked' in data. To Jellitsch, it is crucial to conduct the measurements himself. Not only does this activity serve as a diary with unique paradigms, (a practice, as he remarks, preceded by On Kawara, who also described each day per atypical criteria), it further embeds his physical reality with his work upon the virtual. Peter mentions that at the final stage of making his drawings, his hand, through the frequent repetitions, shifts into the mode of a self-acting, automated, mechanical device. Just like with any other machine, failure events ensue.

This book premieres the physical glitches traceable in the deteriorations of the drawings as one of the leading roles. While imperfection is an expected, recurring and strived for component in Jellitsch's body of work, perhaps as a common denominator of human, machine and algorithm, we usually get to see only the subtler versions of those errors. Here, we are allowed to glimpse the outcome of those occasions in which his extremity lapses to a greater extent, a non-human peculiarity that befalls the ever-duplicating hand, jointly influenced by muscular exhaustion, relaxed vigilance, as well as content translated from the ether — precisely the state of becoming an apparatus, which the first wave of Surrealism sought in their use of automatic techniques such as writing and drawing. The sublime emerged apace with advancements in the field of optics, just as imaginations about the deceased reaching the threshold of human perception correlated with the advent of technology per se, assuming a machine-like state often by means of automatic writing, specifically had the incentive to receive messages, or at least signals, from the ether. Today, we are less concerned about spirits crossing realms as we are about artificial intelligence developing consciousness beyond our control.

Developed in the 1770s, clockmaker Pierre Jaquet-Droz's automaton 'The Scribe' reproduces cursive text, implying human-like self-determination, which in turn was met with tremendous interest at the most important European courts, propelling Jaquet-Droze to enormous fame and prosperity. But he had to frequently calm startled and bolting courtiers and royals by revealing the mechanisms located inside the automats — without precedent at that time. As mentioned earlier, further above, it appears that as long as we feel that the innards of the machineries we employ are manageable, we won't be all that distressed, and due to our habitual daily usage of the Internet, we view it with familiarity and intimacy and marginalize its inherent perils.

Peter Jellitsch demonstrates the complexity of the workings behind the interface that are impossible to grasp or control for the common user, without having to employ failure events. The downside of relinquishing responsibility accompanied by a perceived relief of burdens and increased efficiency (supposedly, as Jellitsch asserts, software updates, pop-ups and distractions of this nature, amount to considerable

delays on an everyday basis), in an ever-acce-
lerating world, is being governed and ultimately
robbed of deliberate choices. Looking back to
Jellitsch's previous works in which he imagined
dystopian urban planning determined by Wi-Fi
signal strength, another way of the virtual in-
fluencing the real plane would be, for example,
the regulation of house prices in different areas,
corresponding to the quality of their Wi-Fi re-
ception. We already see our movements dicta-
ted by how fast we can download information,
perhaps we arrange our furniture accordingly,
or we choose a hotel that guarantees an impec-
cable signal, or might sometimes simply choose
one cafe over another. The effects are slight and
exquisite, but nonetheless forceful.