

Neverending answer

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Inscriptions

– contemporary thinking on art,
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As philosopher Paul Virilio once said: when we invent the ship, we also invent the shipwreck.² I would add that what we learn from shipwrecks helps us make better ships. When I first read the thematic description for this issue of *Inscriptions* – “Artificial Life, Ethics and the Good Life” – I immediately thought about vessels; that vessels are obvious but fantastic subjects for matriculating through a life well lived. Vessels provide everything positive about movement, their protection and shelter is impressive, and their engineering is the platform upon which to collaborate our various intelligences. We project upon the vessel our best selves, outfitting them to explore our needs and dreams, and to journey in time past and ahead.³ When selecting artists for this journal, I considered those who use vessels as an act of empathy, who expand the definition of vessels from objects such as boats and trains, to also encompass action, intelligence, ritual, embodiment... whose purpose is to enlighten, embolden, protect and project. More specifically, I wanted to find artists who expressed the concept of vessels through something akin to Donna Haraway’s ethical position on sympoiesis: “*making-with*”. In her latest book *Staying With the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, Haraway ends a chapter on art and science this way:

The decisions and transformations so urgent in our times for learning again, or for the first time, how to become less deadly, more response-able, more attuned, more capable of surprise, more able to practice the arts of living and dying well in multispecies symbiosis, sympoiesis, and symanimage-nesis on a damaged planet, must be made without guarantees or the expectation of harmony with

those who are not oneself—and not safely other, either. Neither One nor Other, that is who we all are and always have been. All of us must become more ontologically inventive and sensible.⁴

Finding technologically driven artists who care about ‘artificial life, ethics and the good life’ is not difficult; this is a major concern for many. Artists often visualize philosophical problems, plopping us smack down in a carnival house of mirrors; sometimes providing answers, but more often posing excellent questions. The use of technology in art (i.e. video, sound and photographic software, cameras and other devices, programming, hacking, coding, artificial intelligence, all things software, hardware and otherwise) allows us to look at ourselves in ways that are difficult to describe in words. New perspectives can provoke empathy. Once the body has been brought into the experiential others’ space and story through imagination, creation, and visualization, the patterns we share become obvious and therefore, meaningful.

New media artist Surabhi Saraf⁵ dives straight into the most important of all that is enigmatic: the emotions. In her multimedia project *Awoke and the Awokened*, she asks: what if we gave the experience of our emotions a material form and created an artificial intelligence (AI) to help process them? This project is an ongoing collaborative investigation using video, performance, sound, film, sculpture, and virtual reality. Thematically, Saraf hones in on the negative psychological factors associated with using social media: isolation and loneliness,

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²Virilio, Paul. Personal notes from workshop for European Graduate School, La Rochelle, France, 2007.

³At worst, vessels detain and decelerate the life force, but that is a contention for another day.

⁴Haraway, Donna J. *Staying with the Trouble*. Duke University Press: Durham and London, 2016. p 98.

⁵www.surabhisaraf.net

“fear of missing out” aka FOMO, depression, and inadequacy; all born from habits like constant comparison to others, screen-addiction, “doom-scrolling”, rage-debating, trolling, bullying, self-absorption, persistent advertisements and marketing, etc. What if thoughtfully designed AI was integrated into our screen lives to provide mental health intervention? How can AI be used to advance the values of community care and support? What would that look like? The work highlighted in *Inscriptions* includes a sculpture created by Saraf that includes a screen of materialized emotions, which are presented as an undulating, metallic-colored blob. In another video, performers act out the mental labor of processing emotions as they stare into the screen. Given that emotions are often non-verbal, the actors interact through physical movement; a historically successful form of non-verbal communication. Underlying, Saraf shows how technology is not separate from our bodies and can greatly assist contemporary mental health research to develop new healing practices in support of mental maturity and health.

Exploration, migration and survival – sometimes with ambiguous outcomes – are regular themes in the work of collaborators Kahn & Selesnick.⁶ Throughout their complex photographs, sculptures and drawings, they flatten the boundary between vessel, body and frontier. Their seemingly historic or futuristic creatures engage in undefined ritualistic work and play in spectral environments, which are sometimes metaphorical and sometimes literal. The weirder the scenarios seem, the more likely they become. There are dreamy and willful wanderers, embodying Baudrillardian punctum in space, time and imagination, grown out of messy, innocent resourcefulness. There are many vessels: a canoe, a mob of people carrying loaves of bread acting like a canoe, costumes that are homes and machines, a cave that is a portal, wings, balloons, etc. Individuals feature strongly in these photographs: the society from which they emerge is hidden, but we can guess that upon disembarking their caretaking vessels, they will return with adventurous stories to describe new intelligences.

In her short film, *In Parallel*, artist Grace Weir⁷ draws a series of mathematical propositions from Euclid’s *Elements*.⁸, his geometry book from circa 300 AD. Along with the artist’s voiceover quoting this book, as well as interpretive and historical texts about it, we are shown how parallel lines are not separate, but connect. The whole is always greater than its parts. Mathematics is confounding in that it presents the question: what is *there* and also how do we get *there*. To put it bluntly: what exists before we notice, what emerges from visualization? In the film, Weir crumples up the drawing and beings anew: geometry is ethical in that it demonstrates what concurrently exists equally with what is possible. Through geometry, we build how we live; we engineer our lives in space: be it tool, home, transportation, garden, medicine, city or village. Geometry is at work even when it is not being used. By visualizing abstract and conceptual ideas – by holding science quite literally in our hands – we witness our complicated, enmeshed lives.

Art reminds us that we need better questions, which has been the force behind Feminism for a very long time; however, it will take more than one philosophical trajectory to gain traction: it will require creativity that we cannot imagine but must relentlessly stumble towards. The gesture must include our multitude of experiences and needs, as equally as can be defined. Saraf, Kahn & Selesnick, and Weir visualize the complexities and mysteries of interconnectedness, which they present as a verb: morphing, fleeting, reconfiguring, hiding, failing, presenting, and playing. This is how their artworks answer the questions for the journal’s theme: How must I compose myself? What is a good life, what values are important? How can we reassess our condition? To develop, understand and act through interconnectedness is the primary challenge of our time, and thus it is a strong contending model for how to live better lives.

What I am shown by these three artists? – movement is good. An ethical life is the effort to move, to morph with, to relax from, to circle through, to take in, to recognize and accept, to create space. We are already the time machine we need.

Let us reconsider Virilio’s ship. It is one thing to see the object and the object’s failure as separate events that in turn result in separate entities. However, duality is not going to stop ships from being built, nor pause any resulting catastrophes. In which new ways can we understand the whole event, in which there is really no beginning or end? Poet Adrienne Rich, in her 1972 poem “Diving Into the Wreck,”⁹ motivates us to work harder: that we return to what is forgotten, uncomfortable, failed, denied, unknown, unseen or misunderstood, because *it is us*. We are the mysterious neverending answers traveling through time, bobbing in and out of view.

I came to explore the wreck.
The words are purposes.
The words are maps.

⁶www.kahnselesnick.biz

⁷www.graceweir.com

⁸Euclid, et al. *Euclid’s Elements: All Thirteen Books Complete in One Volume: the Thomas L. Heath Translation* Green Lion Press, 2017.

⁹Rich, Adrienne. *Diving into the Wreck*. W.W. Norton: New York/London, 1973, p. 23–24

I came to see the damage that was done
and the treasures that prevail.
I stroke the beam of my lamp
slowly along the flank
of something more permanent
than fish or weed

the thing I came for:
the wreck and not the story of the wreck
the thing itself and not the myth

[...]

We are, I am, you are
by cowardice or courage
the one who find our way
back to this scene
carrying a knife, a camera
a book of myths
in which
our names do not appear.

fiction,
scholarship,
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