

# **Abandon Normal Devices – they don't seem to work.**

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This institutional presentation of recent FACT programs including Human Futures. Climate for Change and Abandon Normal Devices (AND Festival), new forms of Cultural Leadership will be explored. This will also be an opportunity to outline plans for the next Re Conference, Re:Wire, which is being proposed for Liverpool in 2011, asking questions such as:

How can lessons learned from tactics in converged new media be shared in building strategies of cultural leadership ?

How can we prove the importance of media art and new media histories in relation to a contemporary explosion within digital and networked economies and society ?

How can these histories be positioned to re-claim their significance along with pioneering practices and practitioners ?

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In the struggle to conceptualise, communicate and compare our perceptions we have invented new forms of language, visualizations, and nowhere more so than at FACT, (The Foundation of Art and Creative Technology). How can we continue to create scenarios to continue the development of the pioneering work within new media art, and build on this history to support ad hoc practice, the value of collaboration and new methods of organization and leadership?

Over 20 years, facts have become less definitive and increasingly speculative. In that period have we become less certain of the future or is it that modernism and the promise of 'progress' has not always come up trumps? Most versions of science fiction and futurism turn out to be a bit dumb. Facebook and Twitter (by the time you read this will they sound quaint and old hat?) maybe the dull and ubiquitous manifestations of collective intelligence. And with even speedier methods of comparing information and views, how does this account for perceptive bias and diversity of culture? With this in mind it is not possible to compare perceptions across time and generalize about 'one' world. My grandfather related stories of deepest, darkest Africa, the Amazon and shrunken heads. Bread and jam was the shadow of rationing and post war Britain needed hope. And as a product of that time, I have been privileged to film in zero gravity, and am planning an artists' residency program on the moon, the unimaginable really did get closer.

Our own view of the world has radically shifted not only terms of what we know – but how we know. The world went non-linear, not just analogue video editing being replaced by AVID (Hoover of the editing world). As we have witnessed a plethora of U-Tube explosions, distributed models of production and exhibition, and every conceivable variation between, artists no longer have the monopoly on creativity. Collaborative practice, cheap accessible tools and skills have enabled new models of research and practice to flourish. Perhaps non better cited than our own housing arts health community TV station TenantSpin, where people of different ages and backgrounds have been making their own media for 11 years, as producers and audiences exploring compelling new relationships. Our own media is only as good as our own experience, whatever our relationship to the world, this is what we carry. With perceptions of broadcast and narrowcast, time and space up ended, entire systems of belief and dogma have tumbled.

Not only is this the year that FACT is 20, but also the year marking 20 years since the Berlin wall fell. Bastions of traditional power have been significantly weakened and peer-to-peer information exchange has replaced broadcasting. So the cold war ended, assumptions of 'other' people were further challenged and significant shifts in our ability to listen to new voices became possible. With this, systems of knowledge

transfer - pedagogies and histories have been put into question. Who would have thought 20 years on from a bloody and civic uprising in Tiananmen Square, one of the first tele-visual thorns in the side of the Chinese Communist party, that in 2008 FACT would be representing Britain in the Cultural Olympiad Programme, as part of the world's largest survey of media art at Synthetic Times at NAMOC, the national art museum of China?

Not only have we observed massive change, but we have been part of making it. In deciding whether to take part in Synthetic Times, the NAMOC exhibition, I had to make a call on whether the perception of FACT in this context was going to be positive or negative, and whether we were sanctioning a repressive regime. In retrospect I think it was the correct decision, FACT established new alliances and learned much about new Chinese Culture in the process. I also hope that some of the presentations which illustrated projects successfully finding new contexts for arts and health, disability and climate change to an audience that perhaps had not heard before and that such views may have some lasting impact.

Despite a healthy scepticism of art becoming solely instrumental in the UK context of millennial new socialism - talking in the pub, influencing beyond the art world and closed systems have always been of interest to me personally and at the heart of FACT. How to maintain quality and interest, how to build on excellence and engage more people is part and parcel of being an accountable publically funded institution. Spread and depth are the orders of the day.

As the world's geo-political axis shifts, FACT has too, if Liverpool has dubbed itself the centre of the creative universe, perhaps the axis has been FACT. The FACT building may have been originally conceived as a techno-centric media art centre but has blossomed through love, time and need into a 21c Art Centre, the embodiment of contemporary hybrid research, or a practice based knowledge exchange, rich in participation, emulating strong, deep and social connections to a wide range of communities and places. The real-time negotiation of those relationships and nuanced interchanges, which motivate communication, exchange and action, is the fascination. It is through comparing difference that we learn. Process and comparison of what is both out there and in here is the end in itself. The ontological is where art and artists excel, though this often makes the quantification and measurement of its effects and impact hard to quantify, especially in a climate of late industrialised capitalism – where evidence rules and the credit crunches. In Great Britain, after the empire and empiricism on a half-life to nowhere, emergence is all we know. Since its inception, FACT has demonstrated commitment to making a difference and collaboration. If the world had become relational, the staff have emulated and pioneered an approach and enthusiasm which is infectious, demonstrating pioneering strategies of cultural leadership and arts-led re-generation, I hope this will help FACT and the arts 'industries' avoid being part of a wider cultural bankruptcy.

The proliferation and ubiquity of many precepts pioneered through (new) media arts practice are central to this and can be witnessed across a variety of sectors and networked conditions, from early telematic experiments by artists, to Skype. A new widespread condition of sociability invites us to question the role of media art practice and new media histories in the context of wider cultural and technological developments.

If artists, curators and activists were not knowingly creating a new paradigm or starting a revolution when experimenting with digital technology, we are able now re-assemble those connections and rationalize their importance. This is essential not only to respect and revise pedagogies, but to also remind us of where innovation begins. A range of ad hoc practices intrinsically performative, tactical and at times interventionist, were significant innovations and forerunners to what has manifested as a digital revolution, one re-defining all rules of engagement, collaboration and economy, feeding into evolving policy on convergence, broadcast and the arts. This leads to a number of questions:

How do we connect this past with new media histories to further demonstrate the importance of media art in a 'converged' 21st century 'digital age'?

How can these histories be re-positioned to re-claim their significance along with pioneering practices of

social engagement and inter-disciplinary practice?

Within a framework of emergent models of organisation, what methods of practice based research can be highlighted, evidenced and valued to create a case for further broader investment?

How can this history be tracked and shared to build future strategies of cultural leadership amongst a broader set of disciplines and histories?

How can local models of best practice interconnect with and learn from one another to ensure global relevance?

It is only now that we can rationalise post facto and reassemble those connections. This is important not only to ensure our place in history, but to also remind ourselves that the experiments of artists, designers and technologists have provided early warnings of the cultural, economic and political ramifications of new technologies, through a variety of media tactics, gesture, performance and resistance.

Equally, it is our responsibility to acknowledge the importance of diverse historical practices, contextualising media art and its histories in relation to the current explosion within digital and networked society. In demonstrating the significance of pioneering practices by artists, technologists, curators and our partners, we can chart how these influenced and helped to form emergent models of organisation and the trend towards personalisation, across a variety of sectors and in the new networked conditions. The ramifications of these types of video, media art and new media art practices have extended well beyond the development of discreet artworks, questions of genre, and the practice of art. While these are important areas in themselves, even more significant is the fact that video, media and new media art have been forerunners in what is now termed a digital revolution – a revolution that is redefining all rules of engagement, collaboration and economy. Increasingly, hybrid forms of body and economy, made explicit through experiments in biology and biotechnology, demonstrate the rise of the post-human – itself significant in challenging definitions of human and humanity.

Since the 1960's, a new media culture has been on the scene, introduced by artists such as Nam June Paik, and engineers such as Billy Kluver. Digital culture has become subject to many inquiries, from the early cyberlibertarianism of the 1990s, through to Manuel Castells' 'networked society', John Urry's 'mobile societies' and Bill Mitchell's 'city in bits'. Accompanying the critical celebration of the digital, numerous voices within the public sphere have emerged berating this world of wires. Media scholars have rejected many of the 'effect' based claims about digital culture, though it is necessary to acknowledge the normalizing culture of digitalization that occurs through prominent corporate forces and consumerist practices. Where are the origins of the digital within this contemporary digital world? Tracking how new media art has informed and become constitutive of new media culture remains an unexplored historiography of digital immersion.

Equally, situating new media art within broader social processes, such as urbanization and community regeneration - where FACT also sees its location – asks researchers to interrogate the historical place of aesthetic interventions within the socio-political sphere. While many artists' works address such issues, there has been limited research into such interventions and the frictions they create.

Additionally, the concentration of media art/theory on front-line consumers of 'innovative' communications technology in the West often overlooks the importance of who is being connected to whom, and what turbulence this may create within specific cultures, for example the conditions of less affluent cultures of Africa and Asia, and the disadvantaged at home. Whilst the effects of this turbulence are ultimately unknowable, due to the complexities of the relationship of the technical, social and cultural we can, however, create artistic and research projects that pose interesting questions.

Software and hardware both exist in the world, and at the same time make the world, and in this way have

the potential to open up new worlds and at the same time close others down for all cultures. Media systems can be examined within specific cultures to reveal their structural operations and each operative thread can be followed to reveal the contexts that they plug into.

At the time artists, curators and activists were not knowingly creating a new paradigm or starting a digital revolution, but it is only now that we can post-rationalise and re-assemble those connections. This is important not only to ensure a place in history, but to also remind ourselves of where innovation often begins with artists', designers' and technologists' experiments. FACT actively encourages experimentation, provocation and interference. It is artists that have repeatedly provided early warnings to the cultural, economic and political ramifications of new technologies through a variety of media and tactics, the performative and resistance. Beyond the body, beyond biology and technology, we are dispersed as one ceramic ribbon. The materials that form technology, and their use are part of complex power systems. Trust your instincts and the experience.

“For to perceive, a beholder must create his own experience. And his creation must include relations comparable to those that the original producer underwent...”

John Dewey, *Art As Experience*, 1932.

Still slightly exhausted from experiencing our own 2008 European Capital of Culture Human Futures Programme, we are currently delivering our 2009 UN-sustainable programme, launched with the Climate for Change exposition, this in itself is suggestive of FACT'S next stage as a cultural leader and policy former, where “the only currency is Co-operation”. This is a time of extreme opportunity for FACT as a hub of innovation, interdisciplinary international partnerships and a centre of excellence demonstrating local connectivity and collaboration. Sharing will make our journey easier. As you twitter and muddle your way through exponentially networked conditions, you can blame us.

We invent the society we want to be. We are the real-time experiment.

No one has sensed in the past. No one has sensed in the future. Present is all one can sense for as long as the surface stimulation continues. ( )

As children are faced with learning how to do up their own buttons or cross the road for the first time, or understand what loneliness feels like, the human race has repeatedly had to re-adapt to an ever-changing environment. From finding new food sources or fuel to keep warm, or coping with the effects of war on a mass scale, it remains a daily reality that, for a large percentage of the global population, Human Futures means affording food to ensure survival. The context of the issues and discoveries explored in FACT'S Human Futures programme last year, developed as a major component of Liverpool's European Capital of Culture 2008. Bringing together artists, scientists, philosophers, technologists and ethicists into face-to-face dialogue with the public, who have an equal investment in the future, we created conversations, workshops, exhibitions and symposia that were broad enough to engage people from a wide range of disciplines and which had multiple entry points for non-specialists. De-mystification of technical languages, artistic intervention and debate are central to creating more meaningful opportunities to consider how debates about the future impact on daily life. And this was planned well before the credit crunch. Towards the end of the year the context had changed radically as a form of viral terror spread through the mainstream media and trickled down through the banking community and into general society as banks tumbled and with them life savings, some of which belonged to a friend of mine from Iceland.

Although the media became saturated with images of collapse and dread we continued doing what was planned through the third and last quarter of 2008, Pipillotti Rist exhibition, Liverpool Biennial including the works of U Ram Choe, Ulf Langheinrich, Lisa Rheina, Tenrence Handsome and Stella Brennan. We were also planning our 2009 program UN-sustainable in response to Liverpool's slightly flaccid, Year of the Environment, because that's what we thought it was, un-sustainable, pre-credit crunch levels of expectation,

borrowing and consumerism, coming home to roost. It is easy to say this with hindsight and 'victims' of things which go wrong in the future such as poor financial management, often wish they had taken different financial advice. The compelling thing about the 2007-2009 financial crisis is that everyone knew. A form of herd instinct allowing the most influential and privileged to exist in a state of denial, do we really want to know what will happen? This is a large part of the tension that rests in us as individuals, busy in the present and all debates around sustainability and economy.

The complexity of the legal, ethical and scientific debates that help us navigate around ideas about the future is vast, and intersection and cross-pollination is problematic. While our society today seems to offer infinite access to knowledge and while our interconnectedness invites the consideration of everything simultaneously, knowing everything nevertheless remains outside our grasp. On futurology, Bruce Sterling writes that,

'Tomorrow Now is a book about nearly everything. But you can't investigate every aspect of the future because it's like writing and investigating every aspect of the present.'

So, if it is in the present that we find our future, the problem of the vastness of everything and the elusiveness of understanding remains. This causes anxiety. And while we can try to predict some of the causes and effects of tomorrow from what we know about today, it is predominantly unexpected external influences that determine individual and group behaviour, and that lead to significant change. Change is difficult and can be painful, fear of pain can be worse than pain itself, and yet, how we deal with pain and change is not only governed by external forces, our power to imagine, re-narrate and innovate can give us comfort in changing circumstances. Most powerfully, our ability to imagine things differently can actually enact change itself.

Yet art is not a panacea for society. Neither is it a crystal ball into which we can gaze and see what lays ahead. It does not necessarily even provide us with any answers. With a self-reflexive sense of our own institutional agency, FACT's Human Futures programme has attempted to navigate a set of concerns about life that we face collectively at the end of the first decade of the 21st century. From the birth of cinema, through collage in film, to media artists' manipulation of individual frames and sub-frames, artists and technologists have explored non-linearity. Stories do not have to be told with a beginning and an end. Into a digital environment where editing and special effects blur seamlessly into primary production, the concept of the original is no longer so relevant, as all content can be manipulated. Truth and deception overlap.

Artwork and art process has the power to encapsulate some of the most complex debates of our times and, through offering a visceral experience, can traverse intellectual distances at lightning speed. Artists have synthesized worlds into which the possibility of representation is infinite. They have found new forms of expression and have animated new architectures. They have often attempted this outside the realm of pragmatism, the political, and the plausible. In this way, they sustain a crucial feedback loop into the dominant ideologies of our times by questioning from the left field and insisting that there are different ways of looking at a problem.

Producing a programme with the lofty ambitions of engaging theoretically and creatively to comment on the future of humanity raises a set of challenges. Applying this overarching title to a series of works that, like all good art, defy categorization, would have been glib over-simplification and reductionism had we not accepted from the outset that Human Futures was a mode of inquiry, as opposed to a didactic descriptive framework into which a whole body of work would sit comfortably.

Instead, we engage with the role of artistic practice in the broader context of knowledge and research development. Artistic practice is a process that, however focused in its questioning, rarely works in a linear fashion. The artists we have worked with have not taken the question 'what is the future of the human?' and tried to answer it literally. Pipilotti Rist's practice over the last two decades has drawn on the fragility and complexity of the human condition, exploring how mass media relates to individual identity, and how overarching systems such as religion can affect and structure the way we relate to the world.

The media systems we live and work within, with their velocity and insidious power, have been central to the work of AL and AL over the last ten years, as they have woven alternative universes out of computer-generated imagery and blue screen technology. Simultaneously critiquing and celebrating the speed with which a global cultural village consumes and worships fame and power, and the digital culture that reproduces and endlessly copies these persona icons across the planet, AL and AL's work was developed for the Human Futures programme from an 18-month residency in Kensington, a ward just outside Liverpool city centre. Of its time and of its place, *Eternal Youth* superimposes the aesthetic of the sci-fi film onto the collective psyche of lost boys in a city that is struggling to find its way into the 21st century.

The artists who contributed to curator Jens Hauser's *sk-interfaces* exhibition – from well-established artists such as Orlan, the Arts Catalyst group and Stelarc, to younger artists such as Zane Berzina and Julia Reodica – all produced work that focused the audience's attention on the big questions of life via the physical details of life itself: an ear growing on an arm, a cell being killed in a Petri dish, a pretty jewelry box containing what seems to be a tattooed piece of flesh that is, in fact, a designer hymen. Through capturing a fragment of life and turning it on its side to look at it from a different angle, these artists not only create potent artworks but also model new ways of looking at the world.

Art can bring the complexity of life alive. Zbigniew Oksiuta's experiments in creating environments that can operate outside gravity seem fantastical, and the workings of a sci-fi enthusiast with too much time on his hands. For instance, in one piece, the artist creates the conditions that would be needed to send a capsule of plant seeds into space to enable life to exist outside Earth's atmosphere. However, on closer inspection, his work engages with the scientific proposition that the survival of the human race will, in time, require leaving the planet. Oksiuta's work is highly formal and beautiful and points to the fragility of the conditions needed to sustain life. His art does not lecture us, nor does it represent scientific facts. Instead, it creates a space where we come face-to-face with the material reality of our existence; it makes the intangible and grandiose tangible and small. Alternatively, Swiss artist Yann Marrusich's moving performance complicates our sense of biological separateness and visualizes the shared system of intake and output that enables human life – breathing in and breathing out and the sharing of oxygen. His contribution to Human Futures sees the artist locked in a plexi-glass pressure-controlled tank after having ingested methylene blue. As the pressure rises, blue liquid starts to drip from the pores of his body; first from under his arms and from his mouth and then eventually the whole surface of his body releases the blue – even dripping from his eyes. Revealing the workings of a body that almost always remains invisible and showing how much we seep into the world around us, Marrusich's work raises concerns that are directly articulated by artist Oron Catts. Catts' work in laboratories has been driven by a concern that the ethical frameworks that exist within scientific contexts are not rigorous enough and do not consider the implications of what they mean for humanity at large.

We cannot separate art from the cultural conditions of its production and, more widely, its role within the public sphere. While thinking about the future in the public domain is a gesture towards a form of civic participation that, it can be argued, only the arts can access, this work does not aim to mask the harder realities of life. It does not cushion the blow, or get every participant a job, but it aims to carve out freer spaces for debate and discourse, where difficult conversations are allowed and, indeed, encouraged. The by-products of this process are often raised self-esteem and awareness, confidence and a sense of self-worth that can in turn lead to hard social outputs. By holding human futures at the heart of the matter the ephemeral character of socio-political agendas that could dominate our field of vision are held at bay. This has enabled us to look further than our immediate social concerns.

Debates led by FACT's community internet TV channel tenants have ranged from the real-time reality of Tesco-led regeneration, to the fact that one of the most profound challenges of the 21st century and the future of the human is our increased redundancy in an expanding post-industrial society. A post-industrial, post-climate-change society was the backdrop for the apocalyptic vision of young people who developed films with FACT's education programme exploring their concerns for the future. Their bleak depictions of life, where the chasm between rich and poor had become even more impenetrable, sickness more virulent

and humanity no more emotionally robust than today, provokes a conversation around what we need to learn today to have the tools we will need to survive tomorrow.

Our histories of art, science and media have run parallel to the rise and demise of industrialization of an increasingly bigger slice of the globe. Collective philosophical and empirical understandings of the world are imbued into the realm of art. In turn, art's economic framework is part of the globalized carbon fuel-based system that we live in today. Art is implicated in the structures it critiques. And yet, as the binaries of synthetic and natural, constructed and real, have become less and less helpful, it is our curiosity to investigate the relationships between things that lead to the development of new knowledge. Art helps us search again for those ideas that are often overlooked or taken for granted but which, if we could think about them differently, could significantly alter our experience. As Michel Serres (1995) has commented: 'the error condemned today will sooner or later find itself in the treasure houses of discovery'. (2)

By asking the question 'what is the future of the human?' FACT has aimed to provide a safe space for cross-disciplinary debate, art and practice-based research. Through actively encouraging experimentation, provocation and interference, we acknowledge that it is artists who have repeatedly provided early warnings to the cultural, economic and political ramifications of new technologies through a variety of mediums, tactics and gestures. Many of the following texts and images in this volume demonstrate how performative acts and resistance to accepting the status quo explode the terms of engagement and insist that we address big questions differently.

In a post-human, digital age where we can easily imagine ourselves beyond the physical confines of our own mind, body and world, art can offer the tools we need to think differently about ourselves. Obfuscating our collective, critical faculties at a time when we must think laterally and not literally would be folly. In this task, we find the role of art agencies – such as FACT and our international partners – to be to protect the complex practice of making art and to pioneer its inclusion in the social domain on its own terms. We are part of a vital learning process to help articulate what we value about art, what the public is most concerned about for their futures, and what our institutional responsibility is to the practice that is at our artistic core.

The exchange of ideas around these themes between practitioners and commentators across disciplines is essential in moving beyond image, surface and appearance. Humanity's obsession with status, wealth and control has, in the technology-rich 21st century, thrown an age-old quest for the extension of life into an increasingly possible socio-economic framework; the ramifications of this need intelligent and challenging discussion. Neither the hand of God, nor science and technology is going to fix things for us. That time is over. False expectation and reliance on other people to resolve things never was an answer. In imagining human futures we accept our own agency and re-invent media art histories. We invent the society we want to be.

"Art's task is to contribute to evolution, to encourage the mind, to guarantee a detached view of social changes, to conjure up positive energies, to create sensuousness, to reconcile reason and instinct, to research possibilities and to destroy clichés and prejudices." (Pipilotti Rist, 2008: 208). (3)

## References

From Mike Stubbs (2001). Short film, ZERO. Celebrating the 40th anniversary of Yuri Gagarin's first manned trip to space, in an age when space tourism has become a reality what does the future hold for our new born? A first shaft of light, a fragment of an image, first movements and a sense of independence. Zero is a lyrical view playing on the metaphor of weightlessness, mobility, existentialism and consciousness. At what point are we aware of our own bodies, what is private and where does the external world begin? Text from writings by Net Robot, Netochka Nezvanova.

2 Serres, Michael (1995). *Conversations on Science, Culture, and Time*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press

3 Rist, P. (2008). 'Pipilotti Rist Questionnaire'. *Frieze Magazine*, September 2008, 117 p. 208. Also available online at [http://www.frieze.com/issue/article/pipilotti\\_rist\\_questionnaire/](http://www.frieze.com/issue/article/pipilotti_rist_questionnaire/) [accessed: August 2008].