Tyler Coburn

Human bodies versus computer-based interfaces

by Karen Archev

Do you know where your cloud data physically resides? How Siri recognizes your voice? Or what happens to your computer when it's recycled? Tyler Coburn's work reflects upon the mechanisms that make up today's most omnipresent technologies, from server farms to speech-recognition software and the growing problem of electronic waste.

The New York-based artist and writer's 'I'm that angel' (2012–13) – a script written in the most fractured of subjectivities and intended to be performed as a closet drama, a play acted by one reader and not on stage – covers topics including cloud computing, intangibility, plastic surgery and moving back in with your parents. 'I'm that angel' is organized into three parts, each of which offers a different subject position: the first, a content farmer; the second, the same content farmer who moved in with his mother (who is Facebook) and father (who is Wikipedia); and the third, the content farmer who chooses to rent his cognitive space and turn into a data server. The book's structure borrows Russian writer Viktor Shklovsky's process of defamiliarization (which introduces familiar material in an unfamiliar way), its dense design is laid out like a Talmud that just chucked a can of Red Bull. Coburn toured the project around Europe last summer, himself performing the closet drama in data centres such as e-shelter in Berlin, Google's Zürich headquarters, and the Bahanol/ Pionen data centre in Stockholm, which maintains the servers of WikiLeaks and whose dramatic mountain architecture might have been dreamed up by the art director of The Matrix (1999).

I saw the two-hour version of 'I'm that angel' at the Google building in New York, in which Coburn was replaced by the actor Justin Sayre, who read the entirety of the book in a conference room overlooking server racks exhibited for display to visitors. The reading was punctuated with an intermission and a tour of part of the data centre's facilities, with the feat of being inside such a restricted environment not lost on anyone.

Coburn's subsequent projects continue to consider the interaction of the body with computer-based interfaces. Naturally Speaking (2013–14) examines the evolution of the utterance, proffering that avian computer users increasingly relate to their machines through speech, including posts on Facebook or Twitter. Coburn developed an essay, again idiosyncratic in format, which collated texts from language theory and cinema studies; it waxes philosophical upon the magic of speech recognition in humans in contrast to the uncanny qualities of speech-recognition programmes. Commissioned both as an experimental text for the book You Are Here: Looking at Art After the Internet (2014), and as an installation for Kunsthalle Munich, Naturally Speaking takes the form of a video featuring the essay in pop-up windows of Macintosh speech-recognition software, the text written as you might vocalize it to a computer: 'One of the first speech recognizers was a dog named Rex Period. Created in the 1970s, COMMA he responded not only to his master's voice COMMA but to any speaker who called his name at a prescribed frequency PERIOD. The installation also includes a Mies-inspired mid-20th-century modern bench installed next to two monitors playing the screensaver-cum-essay, Waste Management (2013–14), focuses on the peculiar case of a company in Taiwan that attempts to recycle electronic materials with high lead content, such as cathode ray tube monitor glass and printed circuit boards, grinding them to dust and turning them into not very useful objects such as slightly toxic architectural bricks. As it turns out, they also use the powder to make sculptures and paperweights, which Coburn utilizes as 'found' objects. (The materials are safe enough to be displayed but are too toxic for regular skin contact with humans.) The paperweights – small, glossy manufactured black crags meant to act as scholars' stones: traditional objects of contemplation in Chinese culture – are installed on a table and accompanied by a soundtrack on headphones that recites in Mandarin Joseph Addison's 1710 it-narrative (a work of fiction narrated by an animal or an inanimate object), 'The Adventures of a Shilling'. The story anthropomorphizes a shilling, its trek through the global economy and its untimely end when it is melted down into fodder for a man's sculpture. It is the imposition of the it-narrative upon this reclamation material advocates the importance of the social and industrial lives of objects – perhaps a 'ocular up yours' to currently fashionable theories associated with 'object-oriented ontology' which avow the independence of objects. Coburn introduces us to the often-visible and nearly incomprehensible inner workings of the mechanisms, interfaces and machinery that facilitate our daily interactions with the computer, and simultaneously defamiliarizes us with the hyper-contemporary speech and behaviours these technologies have helped birth. In doing so, the artist points toward the sublime disparity between the seen and unseen dimensions of advanced technology and its effects on contemporary culture, educating us, hopefully, out of this curious gap.

Tyler Coburn is an artist based in New York, USA. I'm that angel was performed in January at Easy Street Data Center, Portland, USA, in collaboration with Disjecta Contemporary Art Center. His work is currently included in the group exhibition 'La Voix Humaine' at Kunsthalle Münch, Germany (until 30 March), and the 2nd CAFAAM Biennial, CAFA Art Museum, Beijing, China (until 20 April). His written works, 'Charter Citizen' and 'Robots Building Robots', have recently appeared in e-flux journal and 2HB, published by CCA Glasgow, UK.
Coburn’s I’m that angel covers cloud computing, intangibility, plastic surgery and moving back in with your parents.

1 I’m that angel (detail), 2012–13, book and performances, book design by Eric Mylund

The Worp (detail), 2013, commissioned illustration by Amazon Mechanical Turk worker, A2YFM1CT19G9BFM, first published in Art Papers, September/October 2013

3 Scholar Store, detail from Waste Management, 2013–14, audio and found materials, CRT monitor glass, epoxy and glass fibre powder from printed circuit boards, 20 × 14 × 10cm

4 Naturally Speaking, 2013–14, screensaver with voice-recognition monitor, dimensions variable