

PERFORMANCE

Tyler Coburn: I'm that angel

'I spent an evening in the cloud,' is how I have come to describe attending Tyler Coburn's recent performance *I'm that angel*, 2012-13, in the nearly completed Volta Data Centre in central London. Part of a series performed in data centres around the world – secure facilities where internet servers are housed – Coburn's event comprises two distinct parts: a reading from his book of the same title and a tour of the building. Of course, to describe a data centre as 'the cloud' is not inaccurate but is a poetical mismatch for the physical reality of the information storage environment: row after row of identical off-white server cabinets, each with the same LED indicator lights and panelled housings, their design and layout being purely a function of spatial and thermodynamic efficiency. Virtual real estate at Volta is measured in rack space units and kilowatts. And, once fully operational, the former Reuters building will consume more electricity than the Shard, despite containing less than 7% of its floor area.

It is within this charged atmosphere that Coburn read to a small group seated in the marketing suite, a surreal showroom simulating an operational data centre including (empty) server racks, (fake) cable and cooling conduits, and (non-functioning) emergency systems. For a building so remarkably functional, the very existence of this suite implies that there is indeed an aesthetics of the cloud, at least where the selling of space to potential clients is concerned. The Volta marketing pitch would later become relevant in the second half of the performance, but to begin with Coburn read animatedly from his book, the poetic inner monologue of a 'content farmer'.

A content farmer writes online articles designed to attract search-engine algorithm hits by constructing a text that uses a maximal number of trending topics and keywords. In other words, this person creates a text that is co-authored by the internet itself, which in turn is a reflection of global aggregated attitudes and trends. Coburn's *I'm that angel* is thus a fragmented torrent of phrases, quotations and musings that oscillate between pop culture topics like the Kardashians and stream-of-consciousness self-reflections about virtualised existence. The protagonist often exudes existential anxiety (that angel refers to Walter Benjamin's burdened witness to history after Paul Klee's 1920 painting *Angelus Novus*), but more often than not speaks with the contrived pop freshness needed to satisfy his attention-deficient readership.



interior of Volta Data Centre

Immediately after the reading, the tour of the data centre began, led by a Volta marketing executive. The transition from poetic meditation to technological sales pitch could not have been more jarring, but in keeping with the idea of co-authorship, Coburn always insists that this aspect of the performance is undertaken by an employee of the company. Our enthusiastic guide went on to showcase the security, adaptability and resilience of the new facility using a technical vocabulary that had so far been missing from the performance. Coburn himself became an observer at this point, silently complicit in the rhetoric of chief information officers and corporate business.

Since Volta had not yet opened, security was less of an issue than it would have been for a fully operational data centre. The sales representative happily took the group through the entire facility, from the giant air conditioning units on the roof to the dozens of bright red argon tanks in the basement which comprise the fire suppression system (argon extinguishes flames without damaging electronic equipment). The so-called 'meet me' rooms, where fibre optic cables enter the building and interface with the data centre cabling, proved to be a poignant reflection area for Coburn's earlier reading as the actual gateway to the cloud.

As Coburn intended, the tour raised ethical questions about the surrounding digital infrastructure, especially for its left-leaning art audience: What are the privacy implications of data storage? Does the centre recycle its excess heat? Who stands to profit from the multi-million pound investment? Data centres are giant arks that are densely filled with the world's information.

Personal emails sit side-by-side with international bank accounts, streaming films, classified military documents and, as our guide reminded us, a lot of pornography. The centre itself, like the company that owns it, aims to remain politically, ethically and morally neutral, operating akin to a free port in Switzerland. The fact that the Prism scandal had broken only a couple of weeks before the performance – on the day of the readings, the US Justice Department charged Edward Snowden with espionage and theft of government property – only added to the group's mixed emotional responses of awe and anxiety.

In comparison to the book version of *I'm that angel*, Coburn's half-hour reading only allowed enough time for the first third to be performed. The live audience thus missed out on the full story of the content farmer who eventually tires of endless trends and opts instead for a more physical existence by transforming into a data centre server. On the other hand, the performance of the partial text within such an uncanny environment emphasised the analytical over the narratological: by recasting texts gleaned from a typically inattentive mode of consumption (web surfing) to one of hyper-concentration (art performance), the artist revealed the texts' superficiality and vagueness. While Coburn's angel of history is blown forward by the storm of progress, he is equally disoriented by the diffuseness of the cloud. ■

Tyler Coburn's *I'm that angel* was performed at Volta Data Centre, London, 21-22 June 2013, and was organised by the South London Gallery.

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