

Bucknell, Alice “HOT! Stine Deja. Body Talk” CURA. 28 (7 June 2018)

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STINE DEJA

BODY TALK

At a moment where technology seems to mediate every aspect of our lives, even permeating our most intimate activities in the form of birth control apps and smart toilets, how do we evaluate the benefits and potential hazards of its ubiquitous grasp? While it's tempting to defer to the pre-Smartphone generation and modern technophobes for the answer, the most accurate feedback comes from those fully immersed in this new world of tech-enabled intimacies, like Danish artist Stine Deja.

Deja's practice explores the sticky in-between of real and virtual worlds with a striking arsenal of media that includes 3D animation, immersive installation, moving image, and digital surrogates. In Deja's simulated spaces, uncanny avatars hinge between what's strange and familiar, seducing us with not-quite-real products informed equally by the artist's simultaneous fascination and revulsion with our hyper-commercialized contemporary culture. Concealed beneath a sleek surface, multiple layers of social critique meld with absurdist aesthetics and tragicomic narratives to create a cybernetic landscape of fantasy and desire. At the heart of all of Deja's projects is a keen interest in how these heightened emotional states, often coaxed out by late capitalist narratives of self-care and guilt-free indulgence, are displaced onto the body.

With each exhibition presented by the young artist, this critique gets a little sharper; its physical form becomes a little more sophisticated. *Synthetic Seduction*, held at Annka Kultys Gallery in London between February and March 2018, saw Deja join forces with fellow Danish artist Marie Munk. Born from an intensive research period where articles, books, films, and other materials on technologically-mediated systems of human interaction were exchanged between the two artists, *Synthetic Seduction* channels the potentials and paradoxes of digitally-enabled intimacy as its central subject.

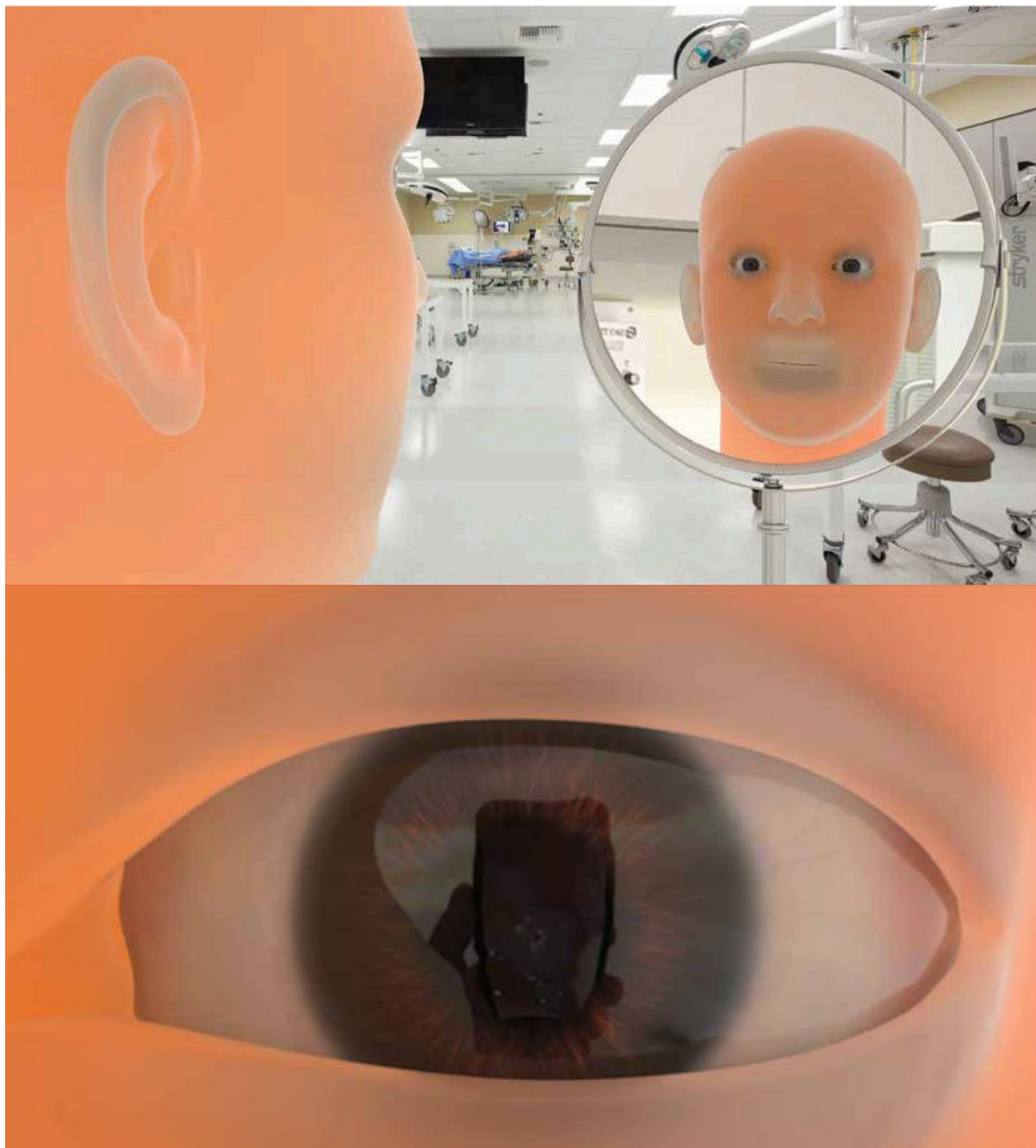
TEXT BY ALICE BUCKNELL

Thanks to the 24-hour stream of social media, human interaction is easier than ever before; yet we are arguably lonelier and increasingly disconnected from one another than any other point in history. *Synthetic Seduction* asked if the apparent benefits of a low-stakes and immediate intimacy—whether in the form of face-scan emojis or late-night drunken Tinder binges—are actually less valuable than they seem, in fact asking

from us a larger sacrifice than we might realize. Rather than conferring an obvious approval or disapproval rating on the matter, the duo's response was far more ambiguous, subjective, and very nearly sentient.

In the pristine lofted exhibition space of Annka Kultys Gallery, Munk and Deja conjured an alluring and disturbing installation that allowed visitors to caress the pulsating potential life of e-emotionalism. Steep white stairs quickly gave way to the duo's strange and sterile world embellished with hospital-like blue curtains. At the center of the mostly-empty room was a piece of fleshy furniture appropriately titled *Skin-to-Skin* (2018) that faced a large video screen. A smaller screen titled *Foreigner* lingered in the corner, on which a lonely android sung out a 1984 hit, *I Want To Know What Love Is* from the homonymous 1980s rock group.

Attached to the lumpy loveseat were a handful of various organ-like appendages made from silicone. With varying levels of uncanny, one blob was connected to the loveseat with a human-like umbilical cord; others vibrated and hummed seemingly of their own accord. Visitors to the gallery could cozy up with these silicone creatures while settling in to Deja's new video work, *The Intimacy Package* (2018): an intimacy guide for human-robot relationships. Mining clichés from our continued foray into artificial intelligence and our desire for robots that "love us back," the video addressed the inevitable failure of human and non-human relations.





The hands-on sentient environment of *Synthetic Seduction* is a natural advancement of *Cyphoria*, an earlier exhibition by Deja presented at Annka Kultys Gallery in 2017. Here too, Deja activated the architectural elements of the gallery: this time, transforming it into an airport lounge for metaphysical travelers. Beckoned on by an all-too-familiar live departures board flashing on a monitor at the top of the stairs, visitors-cum-passengers were invited to take a seat on a row of icy metal seats iconic of airport

discomfort. Bleak interior details including an empty Starbucks coffee cup, a couple of sad-looking potted plants, and someone's abandoned carry-on luggage all melted together with a female avatar's hypnotic voice, which greeted weary travellers with the promise of accessing a new, better, exclusive world by "uploading yourself to a new reality" in a video piece titled *Cyphoria* (2015). "Virtual spaces come with freedom to play with identity, in these spaces we can reimagine ourselves and use anonymity as a way to explore new ways of being, communicating and building relationships," says Deja about *Cyphoria*. By offering the possibility to tour cyberspace "without the limitations of your physical body," according to Deja, *Cyphoria* was a space to consider the often vexed relationship of embodiment to technology.

Indeed, the fantasy of total freedom, of transgressing the bodily limits of space-time is a prevailing motif for the allure of the Internet. "We go on Safari, we are Explorers and indeed many bodily limitations are left behind as I masquerade and morph to get the most from the web," sympathizes Deja. Yet our digital footprint, seemingly unintelligible and ephemeral as an ever-growing cache of likes, swipes, tags, and tweets, is in fact a data boon for megacorps gleaned to squeeze capital out of our IRL bodies. Whether that's targeted ads for beauty products on Instagram or through scanning our group chats and email receipts to determine which restaurants to show us while we vacation in Mykonos, perhaps the pinnacle of the digital isn't to offer an alternative world but to sublimate seamlessly into and enhance the one we live in *right now*.

"Increasingly though, I wonder whether this liberation, this infinite-possibility idea that we are fed, is fictional?" Deja asks in *4k Zen* (2017), a project comprised of two videos that together form an infomercial of a speculative product that brings self-care exercises into the realm of VR. According to its lead character—a spritely middle-aged woman with piercing blue eyes—*4k Zen* "Gives you the sense of being present in a *better* fictional world" which provides a "private, portable, motion picture experience anywhere," thanks to a portable VR headset that hovers between Oculus Rift and *Alien Vs. Predator* aesthetics.

"Technology has so much potential to overcome physical and biological restrictions, allowing us to reimagine ourselves without binaries or absolutes," says Deja. "Which is why it's so frustrating when we end up defaulting to the same problematic social standards." In addressing how technology affects issues of embodiment, intimacy, and social relationships, *Cyphoria* and *4k Zen* collectively acknowledge the problematic gender stereotyping of our gadgets. Why are the majority of personal assistants female (Siri, Alexa, Cortana)? "We are basically transferring the systems, history and behaviors we know onto new technology," laments Deja.

Ultimately, Deja's work is so effective because it engages with the aesthetics of new technologies in order to critique their sociological, psychological, and physical impact on our embodied selves. At times idealistic and others damning, Deja avoids sorting technology into a good-bad binary, but instead allows both ends of that spectrum to proliferate, allowing visitors to her supersensory exhibitions come to their own conclusion. She just asks: "Technology enhances and simplifies communication, but are we really more connected?"

ANNKA KULTYS GALLERY

Installation view, Synthetic Seduction, Annka Kultys Gallery, London (opposite page) Foreigner, 2018 (p. 209 top) The Intimacy Package, 2018 (p. 209 bottom) All images
Courtesy: the artist and Annka Kultys Gallery, London