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Disnovation

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Translated from the French by **Catriona LeBlanc**

"Hidden in the cynicism of innovation is certainly the despair that nothing further will happen."

– Jean-François Lyotard [1]

Innovation as obsolescence and ideology

The innovation argument has often been used to justify research-creation in the "digital arts." When tethered to a driver of the economic growth so keenly sought by politicians, this form of art is considered useful. It lends an artistic flair to unbridled technological advancement, imbues cultural industries with a little more soul, and perhaps even provides a critical dimension to regulate some of the excess. Today's artist-engineers can even dream of becoming twenty-first-century inventors, thereby reclaiming a tradition whose roots run deep into antiquity. Whereas all other forms of art are accused, by some, of becoming auto-referential 'art for art's sake' endlessly rehashing recent art history, others believe that the more virtuous "digital arts" move forward, reach a 'younger audience,' and, in the process, take up the forgotten pursuit of a modernity whose promise was future emancipation through the perpetual quest for novelty.

"In the depths of the Unknown to find something new!" (original translation): is this not the most obvious definition of research? [2] What would we think of a field of knowledge endlessly repeating the same theory? Does the history of science not converge with the history of its epistemological ruptures? Is digital art not itself at odds with the current academic incarnation of contemporary art? Does its discussion of our everyday environment besieged by technology not mean that digital art is more contemporary than contemporary?

It would seem that technological innovation profoundly affects our daily lives. It disrupts our existence and modifies our conditions of possibility by transforming the material inscription of memory [3]. Must art not therefore be resolutely engaged in the digital revolution by contributing a little "creativity"? Yet participation implies submission to the ideology and temporal order of a world whose irrational growth is founded on affective anticipation. We don't just want to grow – we always want to grow 'more.' Growth differentials are what matters: "Amazon also states that it expects to make only \$27.3 to \$30.3 billion in sales in the fourth quarter. This represents a non-negligible increase of 7% to 18% in one year, but is disappointing for a market previously expecting to earn \$30.9 billion" [4]. The discourse of innovation is both seductive and autotelic. Although we know not where we go, we always want to go faster and faster still and, because growth appears to function independently of human will, it is we who must adapt. Despite the fact that development, on which innovation in a large part of digital arts research is based, appears endless, we feel as though we're going nowhere fast.

Innovation merely gives the appearance of novelty. Its material effect is less the production

of new things than the planned obsolescence and accelerated disposal of an ever-increasing quantity of technological gadgets. As Fredric Jameson writes: "Aesthetic production today has become integrated into commodity production generally: the frantic economic urgency of producing fresh waves of ever more novel-seeming goods (from clothing to airplanes), at ever greater rates of turnover, now assigns an increasingly essential structural function and position to aesthetic innovation and experimentation" [5]. Aesthetic innovation is desire permanently without an object: as soon as the iPhone +1 is announced, my iPhone 0 is obsolete – I don't want it anymore. I immediately want the other one, preferably before it's released. My desire invariably collapses beneath the relentless torrent and succumbs to the next desire. At the Apple Store, an endless line of people waits to obtain the precious phone a few days before everyone else. Novelty is produced on the anthrobscene graveyard of our most recently defunct desires. [6] Paradoxically, when everything is new, the integral flow of change exceeds all possibility of production. Innovation is an ideological discourse used to maintain desire within a framework of object production and, as a result, obscures libidinous infiniteness and incompleteness and conceals insatiable desire through infinite, repetitive serialized launches. We innovate in order to achieve a point of unchanging entropic immobility. This is the structure at work on websites like *The Creators Project*: as soon as a new technology appears, creative types immediately hijack them to show how they can be appropriated for more aesthetic purposes. These hacks then become significant selling points for companies which, like Microsoft with Kinect, are well aware of makers' influence in deciding what matters.

Backward

This is why the ideology of innovation is often paired with an immediately accessible, spectacular, explicit, didactic aesthetic. It conceals ambivalence and the emergence of a perceptive intelligence that disrupts our conceptual divisions. In order to meet the conditions of production as well as distribution, an argument must be communicable in just a few lines. Innovation can take the form of immersive experiences, large-scale urban projects, open source software (a shrewd strategy to reduce labor costs even further), and preposterous gadgets. The latest novelties rush past us at the same frenetic pace as the latest news.

Frequent recourse to innovation implies that art submit to the watchwords of profitability and social utility: a work becomes both commentary upon and justification of innovation because it must exemplify and demonstrate it. While submission may provide economic gain, the instability so integral to the work is also lost. We can obtain political justification and even assume the role of revolutionary hacker; however, this is naught but a form of instrumentalization. In this way, we would finally learn what works of art are for and hold their meaning in the palm of our hand. The appeal to meaning – 'meaning-making' – is the watchword of a dominance that demands accountability. In the traditional art economy (the market), this watchword precedes production rather than follows it, and its consequences are therefore perhaps more profound. Because it is reinforced by the discourse of obsolescence, the appeal to meaning cheapens the techniques that nonetheless shape our time. Some techniques are artistically fashionable: "Processing," "Arduino," and "PureData" resonate like so many magic words. By accepting the criterion of innovation, artists submit themselves to a rhythm unknown in the history of art. Speed is not acceleration, however. [7] The paradox is that, although everything changes, nothing seems to change. It's always the same rhythm, always the same reality usurping the previous one. We are merely fueling auto-referential acceleration.



Untitled, 2014, Artie Vierkant, installation view, Model Release gallery, New York. Used with permission.

The concept of “disnovation” is proposed to distinguish two temporalities of innovation. The first belongs to the future conceived as predictable, calculable time. This type of innovation corresponds to a mode of production that accelerates objects’ appearance and disappearance by submitting affect to the rhythm of master-desire. [8] Innovation is characterized by a lack of technological turning point or critical juncture; what matters are perpetual adaptation and the pace of change. Human beings do not adapt to this or that particular object, but to the flow itself. Movement has no purpose other than the submission of desire and the repetition of the past. The second temporality of innovation is disnovation yet-to-come, which “can only be anticipated in the form of an absolute danger. It is that which breaks absolutely with constituted normality and can only thus proclaim itself, present itself, as a species of monstrosity. For this world to come and for that within it which will have made tremble the values of sign, speech, and writing, for that which here guides our future anterior, there is as yet no exergue.” [9] This must be understood as the advent of an abnormal, ill-fitting, unanticipable event. The yet-to-come dislocates not only the factual content of time (the occurrence of this or that thing), but also its factual conditions, that is, the temporal continuity of consciousness. Disnovation questions the very distinction between old and new: the past contains a reserve of the future. This is why past technologies sometimes never pass away. Obsolete objects can be reanimated, brought back, and zombified. [10] Artistic research-creation is firmly situated on the side of disnovation and the absolute contingency of a future that must challenge its own authority.



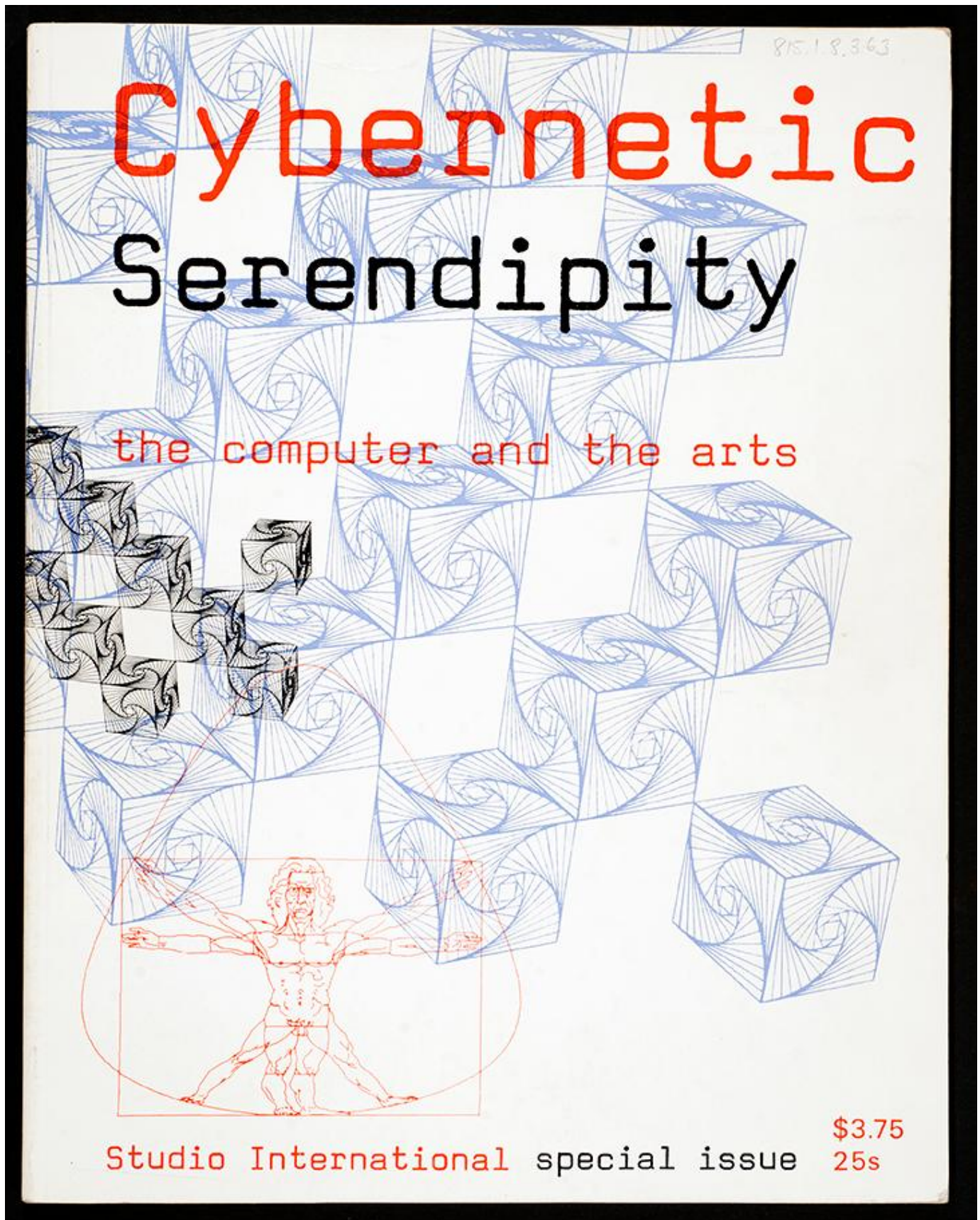
Powder Top Surf, 2014, Études Studio, digitally printed cotton jersey top featuring artwork and photo by Études Studio, Paris and New York. Used with permission.

This conceptual distinction makes it possible for artistic discourses to once again engage the new without necessarily adapting to the social instrumentality of domination: disnovation does not adapt to what exists, but releases a discontinuous flow that interrupts and disrupts the pre-existent, even unto its conditions of possibility in the form of utility itself. Artistic modernity has developed in the intertwining of innovation for the future and disnovation yet-to-come initiated by the desire for emancipation. A link between increased industrial production and the artistic revelation of new, previously unthinkable potentialities has been established. This disturbance does not reiterate the equally modernist discourse in which anomalies interrupt value systems. It is well known that the contemporary capitalist system assimilates resistance, turns the unusual into a commodity, and transforms witnesses into traitors. Resistance does not destroy the system – it showcases and justifies it. After all, resistance is electrical conductivity. [11] This is undoubtedly why capitalism values hacking and glitches in art; they stimulate the circulation of the integral flow. Perhaps disnovation should be viewed not as digital influence on the cultural, but as cultural influence on the digital. In other words, disnovation moves from the present into the future, not from the future into the present.

Post-digital dread

An era is ending, and its end will undoubtedly be interminable. Today, “digital art” is not a creative form determined by its medium, but a period of art history between the late '60s (i.e. *Cybernetic Serendipity* and *EAT*) and the late '90s (*Ars Electronica*, *ZKM*, etc.). This stretch of time corresponds to a sociological context during which information technology was born and came into general use and computers spread in a slow progression from technical curiosity to dominant social reality. This is why the majority of works from this period – and those that still pursue this direction – are ‘spectacular,’ ‘magical,’ ‘impressive,’ and pre-critical. Lacking reflexivity, these works rarely examine their own aesthetic condition. This aesthetic was possible because, phantasmatically, artists with access to

technologies unknown to the masses used innovation to take up the aesthetic-political mantle left behind by twentieth-century avant-gardists: they became heralds of the future. At the turn of the twenty-first century, thanks to the Internet, information technology became profoundly commonplace. It is something we all share. Artists can no longer pride themselves on a privileged vision of the future; at the most, they can focus on the present or immediate past in an attempt to disentangle structures rendered illegible by the integral flow of a temporality forever spilling into everyday concerns. By talking about art in a technological or post-digital world, it is possible to clearly situate the widespread adoption of the digital and its subsequent 'inconsequentiality.' The representation of the entire world as digital should be analyzed and critically considered as an effect of the discourse of capital. The digital is not an explanatory principle, but an epigenetic one.



Cybernetic Serendipity: the Computer and the Arts, 1968, poster of the exhibition curated by Jasia Reichardt, London and touring in the United States of America. Used with permission.

Although it may appear so upon first glance, disnovation is not the art of resistance, accident, deviation, hacktivism, or subversion. Far too easily, these weapons of capitalism preemptively absorb all forms of dissonance and exteriority. As Lyotard explains, "This trap consists quite simply in responding to the demand of the vanquished theory, and this demand is: put something in my place. The important thing is this place, however, not the contents of the theory. It is the place of theory that must be vanquished." [12] Disnovation therefore attacks not only chronological time, but space as well. It attacks the digital

understood as an untouchable “black box” (to use Marvin Minsky’s term) disconnected from the world’s unilateral influence. Disnovation reveals that the computer is much more than material, that code has always been a signal, that supposedly rhizomatic network structures are actually composed of hierarchical concentration, and that behind all these strategies of rational mastery lie affects and incidents, contingency and indetermination. The post-digital is disnovative and materialist because it uncovers the ontic nature and material factuality of digital logos. This is why we prefer the concrete griminess of keyboards, pixilated YouTube videos, and piles of dust behind desks and wires to the design and neatness of digital images. Post-digital disnovation is the dread of digital ideology, a return to repressed materials in the opacity of excess.

Involution

In *La monnaie vivante* (1970) and *Économie libidinale* (1974), Pierre Klossowski and Jean-François Lyotard, respectively and each in his own way, demonstrate problems raised by contemporary capitalism. Lyotard challenges the implicit moralist metalanguage of the resistance to emancipation:

[. . .] you [. . .] and divulge: ah, but that’s alienation, it isn’t pretty, hang on, we’ll save you from it, we will work to liberate you from this wicked affection for servitude, we will give you dignity. And in this way you situate yourselves on the most despicable side, the moralistic side where you desire that our capitalized’s desire be totally ignored, forbidden, brought to a standstill, you are like priests with sinners, our servile intensities frighten you, you have to tell yourselves: how they must suffer to endure that! And of course we suffer, we the capitalized, but this does not mean that we do not enjoy, nor that what you think you can offer us as a remedy – for what? – does not disgust us, even more. We abhor therapeutics and its vaseline, we prefer to burst under the quantitative excesses that you judge the most stupid. [13]

This perspective is evident in the way open source discourse attempts to convert a piece of software’s unacceptable heteronomic instrumentality into an acceptable appropriation of source code. Disnovation is not trying to create an autonomous world by reforming the current one. It recognizes the affective ambivalence at work in domination and uses elements of daily life, like software we actually use, as a starting point to address the present’s yet-to-come. Disnovation does not create a pure, unscathed, protected space: it exposes.



Télofossiles (détail) , 2013, Grégory Chatonsky & Dominique Sirois, Museum of Contemporary Arts –Taipei. Used with permission.

Klossowski raises another issue by questioning instrumentality itself:

Many anathemas have been flung against the ravages of industrial civilization since the middle of the nineteenth century in the name of emotional Life. Imputing to the means of industrial production a pernicious effect on affect, i.e., on emotions, means acknowledging that it has considerable moral power, in order to denounce its demoralizing influence. Where does that power come from? It comes from the fact that the mere act of fabricating objects puts their purpose into question: how does the use of useful objects differ from the use of art objects, which are 'useless' for any actual subsistence purposes? Nobody would ever confuse a tool with a simulacrum, unless it is as a simulacrum that an object has its necessary use. [14]

Although instrumentality may initially seem to exist in opposition to the simulacrum – defined in *Nietzsche et le cercle vicieux* (1969) as differences in intensity and art, utility and unusability, technique and artwork – this dialectic is untenable: consumerism does not subjugate a purportedly rhizomatic desire waiting to be released; rather, it is a simulacrum of impulsive desire. [15] Behind the domination and the discourse of mastery a shapeless delight forever lies. This is why disnovation cannot assume the form of oppositional resistance capable of inventing its successor, alternative, or solution. Disnovation reveals impulsive desires at work at the core of innovation. It is involute; it implements the regressive power of techno-scientific rationality. Disnovation detects ideological constructions that underpin realist discourses (“there is no other way to do it”).

Disnovation as program

Due to historical overdetermination, transferability, and a certain amount of universality that strays too far from artistic singularity, the issue of research-creation methods itself may merit dismantlement; however, it is possible to suggest specific programs, or perspective

lines, for research-creation understood as disnovation.



Oculus1, Date unknown, Anonymous. Us <http://whiteguyswearinoculusrifts.tumblr.com>

1. Ideologies

Technologies are not a means to achieve particular (artistic) ends. They are instruments of power defined by specific discourses. Technologies cannot be separated from the discourses that surround and converge upon them. Oculus Rift, for example, must be considered in context with a return to the metaphysical virtual reality ideologies of the '80s and '90s. [16] We must conceive the indistinction of technological materiality and its ideology; we must understand that if the former is used, the latter cannot be neutralized. That ideology constitutes an object that has been stated and restated in many ways. Understanding this preexisting context is essential for research-creation, for here lies its problematization.

2. Anachronism

Criticizing innovation must not result in attributing excessive value to obsolete technologies, do-it-yourself objects, or resistance. Technology-related retromania is a market like any other. Instead, following a concept advanced by Georges Didi-Huberman in a different context, technologies' anachronistic, untimely, mistimed potential should be developed: the new becomes disturbingly old and the old is imbued with a troubling newness. Dismantling time and disregarding the expectation that innovations should innovate – and instead dredge our historical base to the point of becoming archeological – create the feeling that the future is passé and that the past never happened. This means telling an alternative history and considering unrealized possibilities. Therefore, what we call the post-Internet does not describe a linear chronology with a before and after but instead signals telescoping heterogeneous temporalities. This generation of young artists often creates images reminiscent of the digital aesthetic of the '80s and '90s [17], but transforms them to tell a story that never occurred. A hint of the previous era remains, but it is seen from a different perspective. It's as though the past has occurred at last, as though, artistically speaking and following a historical logic in which the potential past had been kept in reserve, the past has finally found its place.

3. Inseparation

While 'digital art' is undeniably trapped in the digital/analog divide, the post-Internet has cleverly escaped this same fate by presenting digital losers (Jon Rafman), transforming the exhibit by documenting and creating series of digital objects (Artie Vierkan), rewriting the recent history of computer science as a heroic tale (Constant Dullaart), and creating indistinction between digital images and analog forms (Rachel De Joode). This increase in aesthetic strategies is grounded in the desire to disrupt the boundary between these two worlds and challenge the discourse of supposed digital immateriality that dominated for decades. Often conducting their research outside academe, this generation of artists clouds the issue by understanding digital as analog and vice versa. For them, ontology itself is anachronistic, as is the nature of the objects that surround us and constitute who we are. Inseparation does not mean that these two worlds are identical, but that they are constantly shaping one another, completing the circle, and reflecting each other. In short, each amplifies the other. The tension between them is at the core of our experience.

4. Technologies and affects

Disnovative research-creation is particularly sensitive to the relationship between technologies and affects. This is not because it takes one as a model for the other from anthropocentric or technocentric perspectives, but because it follows a parallelism of distant proximity: two lines move in tandem but never meet. Disnovation is involution at the heart of our existence as well as our technologies. In terms of research, *La monnaie vivante* (1970) could well serve as a model to bring links connecting the impulsive to the instrumental into play. The Internet is not just another technology, it is the concrete operator of technological globalization (the world-becoming) in that technologies effectively capture our affects in their databases and distribute them in statistics that predict our behavior without understanding it. The way technology circulates, even before research-creation, is no longer in the background – it has become the horizon of our ever-provocative desires.

In conclusion

Research-creation often uses innovation to justify its political, technological, or even aesthetic utility. The critique of innovation presented here is meant neither to protect the supposed art of free singularities nor suggest a "decrease." It is not even a critique, for criticism would introduce a new hegemony. Transgression is already integrated into economy through the choice of particular objects and refusal of others. No external resistance exists because the instrumental regime, even when it consists of behaviors, has no fixed content. It adapts to each thing, it is transformability incarnate, it is "change." [18]
Instrumentalization – domination – does not come from without; it is created by the partition between inside and outside. Art must therefore not be conceived as an alternative, but as a way to reveal the ambiguity of innovation that, behind the discourse of profitability and rationality, is besieged by inchoate desires: the world is consuming itself; growth is destruction; we are becoming extinct – the death wish not of an individual, but of "our" species. It will therefore be

[t]oo late to understand that your passionate, endless questioning always depended on a 'life of mind' that will have been nothing else than a covert form of earthly life. A form of life that was spiritual because human, human because earthly – coming from the earth of the most living of living things. Thought borrows a horizon and orientation, the limitless limit and the end without end it assumes, from the corporeal, sensory, emotional and cognitive experience of a quite sophisticated but definitely earthly existence – to which it's indebted as well. [19]

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Bio

Grégory Chatonsky is an artist living in Paris and Montreal. In 2013, he presented TÉLOFOSSILES at MOCA (Taipei); a second version was presented in Beijing (2015). In 2014, CAPTURE, an overproductive netrock group, was exhibited at the CDA (Enghien-les-bains). In 2015, EXTINCT MEMORIES was presented at IMAL (Brussels). He has participated in several collective exhibitions, including Jeu de Paume (Paris), The Beginning of The End (Timisoara), Mois de la Photo (Montreal), Extimitat (Palma), Der Untergang (Berlin), Connect the doct (Rome), Interlife Crisis (Seattle), Radius (Chicago), Rupetizone (Rome), Augmented Senses (Shanghai), Biennale d'art contemporain (Montreal), and more. His residencies include Unicorn (2015), Villa Kujoyama (2014), UQAM (2007), Abbaye de Fontevraud (2006), and Le Fresnoy (2004). His work explores the relationship between existence and technology, digital ideology and materialism, and the dislocation that haunts the phenomena of production and consumption.

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