

Touching Technology

Touch is perhaps the most intimate act of human sensuality. To touch is to soothe and to be emotive. To touch and be touched is to trust. Human infants touch the world with their mouths as an exploratory method. Unwanted touching is an instant offense to any human. When we love, some of our most intimate moments can only be manifested by the act of touching.

So what is a touch screen and what do I do with one? Can I offensively touch a touch screen? In quiet moments, can I lovingly caress a touch screen? Do I dare trust a touch screen and let it touch me?

It is on this perplexing plane among humanity and technology that many of us imagine ourselves as our global culture rushes into an age where the only guarantee is that technology will touch our lives. And perhaps it is pure coincidence that our most routine interactions with technology involve bringing some of the most sensitive parts of our bodies, the nerve-packed interfaces residing at the end of our fingertips, into physical contact with touch screens and keyboards, but I doubt it. I doubt it because technology is ultimately our creation. Technology is ultimately as human as touching.

But if technology is so human, why is it so many among us harbor suspicion for technology? Why are so many lamenting the loss of humanity as an ever-increasing portion of our activity moves into the binary realm?

My suggestion is we have entered into some strange mirror stage where we do not yet recognize ourselves. These brutal calculating machines, undeniably built by us, confound us because they somehow manage to convey so many of the idiosyncrasies we have been told over and over make us uniquely human. They make us laugh and cry; they fill dull moments as well as bring moments of mind-blowing amazement. The idea that these boxes of metal and plastic pumped with electricity could so fluidly play to our senses is unsettling, and understandably so. Yet when we consider what we do with these boxes we may begin to find some calm. In a quick scan of the desk before me, I see a cellular phone, a camera, and a computer—all non-sensual items, but what role do these items play in my life? The cellular phone and computer function as immediate connections to a network of friends and family spanning the globe. The camera is a documentation device that helps capture both occurrences in my life and attempts at creativity. The computer is a tool that helps manifest my creativity, an avenue to income, a voice that sings music according to my mood, an infant mouth that allows me to explore the world. I am touched by technology.

What is technology touching art?

The concept of art is staring itself in the mirror, eyes struggling to focus, trying to identify itself. The first impressions of technological art are undeniably bewitching, but can we trust what we see? Where is the line between truly innovative art and well-produced cleverness in the age of intelligent machines? In times of uncertainty, our need for a religious storytelling surfaces with renewed intensity, and we become vulnerable to reductive explanations and neatly delineated categories, particularly if they mesh well with our own tradition and history. As our global culture faces a metamorphosis potentially not seen in modern human history, we cling to the hope for answers when we should instead be looking for questions. We must not fail to remember that technology, our human technology, is potent enough to penetrate to the fundamentals of every culture, regardless of custom, class, location or language. Worldwide mobile telephone penetration is well passed fifty percent and has only continued to grow—humans are undeniably wired together as never before. And it is here, in this time of near constant but uncertain connection, in this time of agile corporations and beguiling media, where it falls to art, well-made art, creative art and art of effort to ask intelligent questions with eloquence, dexterity and curiosity.

To ask a sophisticated question is to propose an undefined opening. And it is this lack of definition which requires us to think on our own; to twist and turn the question in an act of discovery as we examine it from as many perspectives as we can imagine. We must be supple with our minds, feelings and skills. The artist as singular genius has been dead for a long time and we must get over it. We must also abandon the suffocating parameters of location and station; no city, master of fine arts program, profession, language or class should claim art as its own. Our technological revolution makes this absolutely clear: creative acts blossom everywhere and there is no single definition at work. Furthermore, the advent of accessible technology has created an unprecedentedly rich forum of interaction, albeit a disembodied one. The moment we process our efforts with these calculating machines, core parts of our own identity waver; keyboards rarely reveal accents. This wavering identity is as exciting as it is disconcerting. As much as we are reaching out to the world through our digital appendages, it is just as likely these efforts are explorations of our very human selves. Our technology is most assuredly transforming what it means to be human, but it must be kept in mind that to transform is to undergo a dramatic

change from one form to another—transformation is *not* creation. In the face of this idea, we must risk the belief that the laughter, tears, boredom, excitement and art we encounter with technology are indeed sourced from humanity itself.

Computers don't yet laugh.

Along this path, the humanity of our technology appears as myriad reflections of our own individual, very human efforts and thoughts. If the machines transform us as we pass through them, then technology is really nothing more than ourselves—these words represent my fingertips stroking a keyboard. This unexpected reflection, while confusing, is thankfully and necessarily questionable as an opening to touch, and being touched by, technology. Uncertainty is to be embraced, but not primitively fondled; more precisely, the undefined spaces we are exploring ask that we be prepared. Narrow, emaciated and abstract knowledge is floundering in a tidal wave of information—there is no longer any highground to claim. Technology is eroding our monolithic knowledge structures and allowing more creative and organic relationships without centers or edges. In this space of de-centers, we must be able to use our hands as well as our minds because exclusively looking for guidance from above is not only infeasible, but dangerous—how can we be certain which way is up? With the development of our technology, the currents of human activity become ever more complex. This is a luscious complexity of mutating identity and experience. Certain knowledge is relegated to a feeling of fleeting moments, and juxtaposition constantly collides with itself. Here among the writhing ideas coursing through our veins of technical communication, we are challenged to find our own questions. I have two.

What has touched you? And what have you touched?