

Feeling Technology with Lauren Lee McCarthy & Ben Grosser

By Chelsea Thompto

We tend to think of technology as “over there”, something separate from more human or hand made objects. Technology is held up as something other than or apart from the human and yet, technology is composed of layers upon layers of human reasoning and decision making. Rather than being inhuman then, technology is perhaps instead hyper-human. This hyper-humanity is an abstracting force, making it challenging for us to comprehend what technologies are doing and why. But rather than being the result of being too separate from humanity, it may be that contemporary technology’s complex interwoven layers of human choice (and bias, and failure, and, and, and...) are what give technological platforms their incomprehensible and alien air.

So, when we are confronted by technology that feels inhuman or cold, it may be a revelatory or radical act to turn away from trying to rationalize or reason with it and to instead try to feel it. This is often not how technology companies or software engineers in general want their products to be interacted with, they would rather their products provoke or elicit feelings in the user rather than being felt in return. But it may be the only way to make sense of the otherwise senseless choices and options we often find ourselves confronted with when engaging with contemporary technology. Technology, and in particular social technologies, elicit very deep and real feelings; to understand why, how, or to what end, it might be most effective to feel our way through the interwoven layers of our hyper-human world.

Artists have always engaged, in both critical and uncritical ways, with emerging technologies. It is often through an artist’s intentional misuse of technology that they are able to reframe our perspectives on the technology itself and perhaps open a space for feeling and not just using, a space for understanding the technology integrated into our daily lives. Lauren Lee McCarthy & Ben Grosser are two such artists. Both artists use contemporary technology in their work while also remaining critical of the technology, and the people and politics that make it possible. While their practices vary widely, both are deeply committed to exploring how we relate to software and algorithms and how they shape our behaviors and values.

Works like McCarthy’s *Follower* (2016) and *Social Turkers* (2013) use the real human labor that often undergirds our digital experiences to create strangely literal manifestations of our digitally mediated relationship to social platforms and surveillance. Throughout these works, McCarthy is both posing questions and attempting to answer them with a mixture of social practice, software design, and performance. Questions like “What if we could receive real-time feedback on our social interactions?”¹ or “What is the relationship between attention and surveillance?”². These questions both shape the work and help place the viewer in a space that feels simultaneously familiar and unfamiliar. In *Follower*, this takes the form of an app that hires a person to literally follow the user, unsettling our relationship to the concept. In *Social Turkers*, remote workers paid to analyze data are injected into real time social interactions. It is in this space of the unfamiliar

¹ Lauren Lee McCarthy *Social Turkers* <https://lauren-mccarthy.com/social-turkers>

² Lauren Lee McCarthy *Follower* <https://lauren-mccarthy.com/follower>

familiar that perhaps technology and its impacts can be felt rather than reasoned with or managed.

In Grosser's *ORDER OF MAGNITUDE* (2019) and *DEFICIT OF LESS* (2021), a paired set of supercut video works, the focus is on a single person and how their mindset has had an outsized impact on our digital lives. In these works, Grosser compiles the recorded speeches of Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg, first creating a supercut of all the times he uttered his most used words "more" and "grow", along with his use of metrics (*ORDER OF MAGNITUDE*), and followed this up with a video of all the times he uttered the word "less" (*DEFICIT OF LESS*). The videos at normal speed would be roughly 46 minutes different in length so, in an attempt to ask "what might the world look like if Mark had thought about less as much as he had about more?"³ Grosser slowed down the "less" video until it stretched on for as long as the "more" video. The result is a slow moving and choppy slideshow with sound stretched out into an ambient chorus that is both haunting and fascinating. Individually or paired, these videos help us feel what Zuckerberg's obsessions and blindspots are and perhaps help us make sense of how we got to where we are in our relation with social technologies.

These artists help us see the humans that make up the machine, the layers of human labor, values, and choice that comprise our digital experiences in hyper-human digital space. Through their work and artists like them, perhaps we can feel our ways towards new relationships to technology and social life online.

³ Ben Grosser *DEFICIT OF LESS* <https://bengrosser.com/projects/deficit-of-less/>