In 'Uncanny Valley,' Art and Tech Collide

BY BENJAMIN SCHNEIDER
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"The Doors" by Zach Blas sets the mood for the exhibition. (Photo: Gary Sexton/ Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco)

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Like a scroll through your favorite social media feed, "Uncanny Valley: Being Human in the Age of AI" is at once mind-blowing and banal.

The exhibition, on view at the De Young through June, seems to have more in common with the lived experience of actually using technology than intended. Its interactive elements, in which a tech novice like your's truly might struggle to partake, at times recall the low-grade annoyance of a glitchy Zoom call.

But the familiar acts of trying to get an app to work, or watching a fairly conventional documentary film — another frustrating trope of "Uncanny Valley" — are interspersed with the truly novel. The greatest moments in the exhibition produce aesthetic experiences out of technology's awesome capabilities; experiences that the tech industry would never have the creativity or courage to produce.

That begins with *The Doors* by Zach Blas, an installation bounded by a circle of upright, glass screens, obsidian and reflective on the outside and enlivened with video projections of a talking metallic lizard on their inward faces. Within this enclosure, astro turf is laid out in the shape of Metatron's cube, a common symbol for nootropic drugs (those cognitive enhancers popular with the startup crowd and endorsed by Joe Rogan), at the center of which stands a display of pill bottles. Green light and sounds — snippets of Jim Morrison's poetry (hence *The Doors*), nootropic literature, and ASMR typing — complete the atmosphere.

Ascertaining all of that information, as well as the work's larger theme of the interconnectedness of tech culture and the 1960s counter-culture, requires some assistance from the accompanying wall panel. But the installation stands on its own as a striking mood piece. The interior has the feel of an overdesigned startup HQ or cannabis dispensary; the kinds of places from whence "tech," whether digital or pharmaco-chemical, is disseminated. But facing the viewer there are only "black mirrors," reflecting back our dim understanding of the effects and implications of these technologies on our lives.

If *The Doors* evokes the aesthetics and history of the tech industry, subsequent works explore what tech is capable of now and in the future.

Lawrence Lek's film *AIDOL* tells the story of a runaway satellite who dreams of becoming the world's first AI popstar in 2065. The film's video-game style CGI seems to represent a future state of consciousness, where the boundaries between gaming and the meatspace no longer exist. (If only the 80 minute film, filled with deep philosophical musings in both Chinese and English, were playing in an actual theater where it could be properly enjoyed.)

Agnieszka Kurant's *Conversions 1* and *2* also destabilizes the viewer's perception of reality. Set behind a forest of colorfully painted termite colonies, the works initially seem to be abstract paintings, a diptych of muted yellow, green and blue blobs over a black background. But as the viewer approaches, the blobs appear to move. What starts as a Mona Lisa eyes effect becomes a

psychedelic crisis of perception. After a few moments, it becomes clear that the images are in fact moving, the blobs are growing or disappearing into the background, slowly changing color. These are not paintings, but LCD screens — well-disguised ones.

That moment of recognition is a magical experience — like using an iPhone for the first time, or transforming your own appearance with augmented reality lenses on Snapchat. *Conversions* open the doors of perception in a much more literal sense than the Blas in the next room over. Yet similar to the Blas, the purpose of Kaurant's work, elucidated on the wall panel, as a representation of an algorithm tracking the social media posts of protest groups, pales in comparison to its affect.

The mood of the exhibition quickly swerves from delight to despair. Simon Denny presents a multi-work meditation on an actual patent Amazon filed for a cage in which a worker would be "protected" from the automated machinery on a factory floor called *Amazon worker cage patent drawing as virtual King Island Brown Thornbill cage (US 9,280,157 B2: "System and method for transporting personnel within an active workspace," 2016)* . The sequence begins with the text of the patent, matter of factly displayed on eight by eleven sheets pasted on the wall for all to read. Next the pages of the patent are transmogrified into papier maché sculpture, coming to life as finely crafted cubist formations. Finally, in the center of the room, there is a full-scale sculptural model of the cage, painted entirely in white, with numbers floating beside it indicating specific points in the patent. (Cell reception in the museum wasn't good enough for me to download the accompanying augmented reality app.)

It's an unholy evolution, demonstrating how a piece of paper can become a dystopian apparatus.
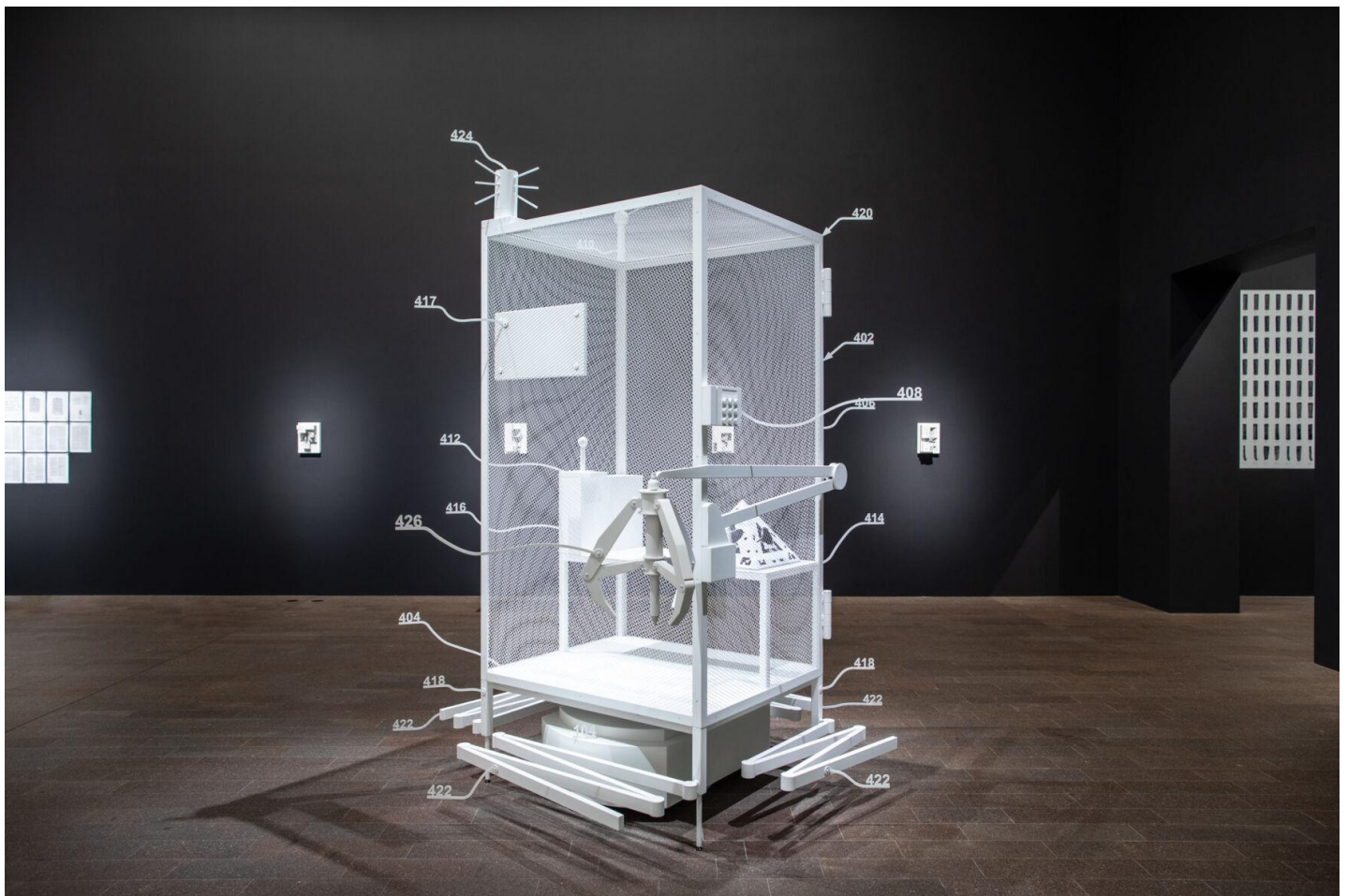
"Amazon worker cage patent drawing as virtual King Island Brown Thornbill cage (US 9,280,157 B2: "System for transporting personnel within an active workspace", 2016)" by Simon Denny. (Photo: Gary Sexton/ Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco)

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While Denny's work is far from the only piece of social criticism in the exhibition, it is the most successful. Trevor Paglen's *They Took the Faces from the Accused and the Dead… (SD18)* — a collage of mugshots of incarcerated people whose likenesses were used without their consent to develop facial recognition software — is forceful, but skin-deep.

Hito Steyerl, one of the foremost theorists on internet art, meditates on the subject of broken windows in *The City of Broken Windows*, but sheds little new light on it.

While the work's textual element, wrapping around the gallery space, contains the irony and provocation of much of Steyerl's previous video work, she departs from this mode in the video portion of this piece. Instead she presents two straightforward documentaries: one about engineers who break windows to train AI security equipment, and the other about a group of activists who replace broken windows in Camden, New Jersey, with paintings. The videos are difficult to hear, with

speakers facing one another across the echoey space, and the lack of closed captioning seems to suggest that the films are not really meant to be heard. Steyerl's trying to say something beyond "these activists are inspiring" and "broken windows-sensing AI is creepy," but it doesn't translate.

In *Shadow Stalker*,San Francisco-based Lynn Hershman Leeson, another pioneer working at the intersection of art and technology, presents a similarly predictable take on a related social issue: predictive policing. There are some interesting and distressing facts in the video portion of the installation, a documentary narrated by *Westworld* star Tessa Thompson, but nothing that really challenges the liberal San Francisco museum-goer. And while things eventually get a little zany in the second part of the film, when "The Spirit of the Deep Web" implores viewers to protect themselves from digital surveillance, the didactic tone feels something along the lines of a NowThis clip on Facebook.

The work's interactive element, entering your email address into a tailor-made website that trawls the internet for personal information and projects it on the wall in the shape of the viewer's silhouette, didn't work for my address, but I did see other people's information pop up.

Later works also fell flat due to their reliance on smartphone-based audience participation. A textable, Bitmoji-looking avatar of artist Martine Syms and a game by Ian Cheng where viewers can add stimuli to a multi-personality AI, were provocative and charming, respectively, but still wouldn't feel out of place in a Microsoft store.

Only with *Being Human* by Christopher Kulendran Thomas and Annika Kuhlmann, do things get really uncanny. This video installation is presented on a translucent screen in the middle of a gallery space, surrounded by rather uninspired abstract sculptures and paintings. The film, narrated by Kulendran Thomas, explores the history and economic development of his native Sri Lanka, and the emergence of its fine art market. Based on this history, Kulendran Thomas challenges the central tenets of Western humanism, including the concept of "human rights," setting himself in opposition to none other than a deepfake version of Taylor Swift, who, in her own way, argues in favor of Western philosophical concepts like autonomy and authenticity.

Still from "Being Human" by Christopher Kulendran Thomas and Annika Kuhlman. (Photo: Andrea Rosetti/ San Francisco Fine Arts Museums)

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After Swift is introduced, the film starts to feel like an Adam Curtis documentary, juxtaposing disturbing historical footage with pop music, including "Poppin'" by Ariana Grande. The space comes into play, too. During climactic moments, the video projection turns off, leaving only the empty see-through screen, and the works of art in the room, products of the Sri Lankan art market. The low-tech trick produces a sense of being immersed in the work more viscerally than any of the digital interactive features in the exhibition.

In *Being Human*, tech is a tool, not a subject. The work doesn't comment on a specific use of technology, or invite viewers to break out their own personal devices, instead it represents ways of being and ways of seeing that technology makes possible. *Being Human*, and a few other works in "Uncanny Valley," approach technology as an integral part of contemporary existence, not some "dark and dangerous other world," a trap that artists working in this subject matter frequently fall into, the critic Sophie Haigney recently wrote in *The Nation*.

There's plenty of darkness in this exhibition, and much valuable information for the public about technology's role in society. But there's tantalizingly little here about tech's role in aesthetics, perception, and experience. As technology continues to advance into our lives, these would seem to be the intersections art is best positioned to explore.