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Post Millennium Tension

by

Dylan Peter Obser

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Fine Arts in Photography and Related Media

School of Photographic Arts and Sciences
College of Imaging Arts and Science

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Abstract

In order to understand the world we live in, as it is mediated through technology, this process driven artwork Post Millennium Tension uses a machine I created specifically to visualize the inner workings of contemporary technology. The artwork is a large multi-paneled photograph and light-box display, that depicts the intimate everyday moments within a relationship. The relationship seen in the photographs is one that began on a phone where the individuals were matched by the Tinder algorithm. That relationship is documented and archived on a phone. The images act as proof and the artwork as a monument to a relationship mediated through technology. To address this, or to explain it visually, I developed a system that creates images that reflect the digital origin of the image while photographing the machine to show the scale of data. How we use devices that create images that supersede our vision or ability to see, is explored.
Extended Artist Statement

*Post Millennium Tension* is a body of work currently comprised of four photographs made up of hundreds of composited images of LED lights. Two of the photographs measure 90x90 inches, one 60x90 inches, and the last one is 60x60 inches. The images are printed at their full resolution of 400dpi and were broken into panels of 30x30 inches. Two of the photographs are printed on a backlit medium illuminated by custom-made LED light boxes. Each photograph is composed of numerous image captures and made by a programmable LED machine. The photographs you see are of the blinking LED elements. *Post Millennium Tension* however, is so much more than these four photographs. It is the outcome of a much more complex and painstaking process that aimed to create images using a system. That system, in turn, generated the images, these two elements, the system and the images are the work that is my thesis, *Post Millennium Tension*.

This work represents an ongoing conversation about technology and how it has changed the way in which we literally view photographs and interact with people through those devices daily. It also examines the concept of what constitutes an image in the contemporary moment. The work speaks to how technology simultaneously allows us to do more and see more while ironically, understanding less about the very thing that enables that view.

*Post Millennium Tension*, the title of my thesis, concerns the heightened feeling of tension or uneasiness as a result of living in our technological world. The title is a reference back to the pre-millennium 1990s, the time I came of age. The 1990s had all the promise and excitement of making art with the advent of digital technology that wasn't fully realized, coupled with the fear that technology could somehow be the undoing of humanity, in the lead up to Y2K. The world didn't end with the new millennium, and we are now fully immersed in the digital era. However, there is a new tension caused by the loss or inability to understand the machines and devices that govern our daily lives.

Devices interpret and radically change our view of the world. They can create images so full of data that our human vision can’t fully perceive or comprehend what we are looking at.
They create hyper-real versions of reality that we accept as real, thereby pushing us to question the validity and truthfulness of the real as the French theorist Jean Baudrillard has argued.

*Post Millennium Tension* employs a series of images to represent the tension created by technology. This tension is exemplified by the ever-growing divide between what can be recorded and what is or can be seen and experienced. The source imagery is lifted from the cell phone text message conversations of a recent long distance relationship. In other words, it is based on a two-year long affair mediated through technology. All the pictures are taken from a relationship that began, was lived, and ultimately ended through this digital device. The four photographs encapsulate my modern relationship experience. The device is where I turn to engage and view our relationship apart from the infrequent times spent together in the real, lived experience. The cell phone serves as the complete container and digital archive of the relationship. In this way, our entire relationship was mediated through it and the relationship exists as a data record of texts, images, and videos stored in both a black box and the cloud.

The block box concept, put forth by French philosopher Bruno Latour represents a loss of vision or understanding of technology. This idea stems from the abstract notion of a black box. Latour states black-boxing is

The way scientific and technical work is made invisible by its own success. When a machine runs efficiently, when a matter of fact is settled, one need focus only on its inputs and outputs and not on its internal complexity. Thus, paradoxically, the more science and technology succeed, the more opaque and obscure they become.1

Through my art and processes, I attempt to open the black box and understand the internal workings of a given system, in this case, the camera, or more specifically the phone as a camera and the images it creates, stores, and transmits. Ironically, to address this, or explain it visually, I developed a system that creates images that reflect the digital origin of the image while photographing the machine. The phone is an ever-present device serving as the collector and transmitter of both time spent together and apart. The phone is simultaneously both a link and barrier, facilitating a relationship and a reminder that it's not 100% real.

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In the initial stages of this project, I began photographing technology in a very literal sense. Mapping it with the camera and combining those images to monumentalize objects, in hopes of revealing and understanding the objects; to see what is unseen. The divide in technology occurs because while we understand what a machine does, we don't necessarily understand how it does it. The images created were meant to reveal that gap in understanding by overwhelming the viewer with the view (or representation) of the inner workings of the machine. *Post Millennium Tension* is the realization of this gap applied to photography in that it both visualizes the machine creating the image and the machine itself. A simulacrum, as a representation or imitation, brings these two images in one. For example, a photograph of light and the machine making the light, when viewed from a distance, an image is revealed that the viewer sees as a photograph. This is in parity with the phone itself, which exists simultaneously as the method of recording and viewing an archive.

To make these photographs I used an LED machine that displays one row of pixels at a time from a small bitmap image file. When placed and triggered in view of the camera at a slow shutter speed the image is captured in the camera. This is simply light painting, elevated and refined. Each of the LED elements displays the colored light corresponding to the color of the original pixel from the bitmap. I was not satisfied with simply making images with the device and thereby needed to reconfigure it to suit my needs. I rewired the machine into 4 rows of 50 LEDs in order to move the camera closer. I wrote custom action scripts in Photoshop to take the bitmap image files apart pixel by pixel, putting them into a straight line. I then photographed the pixels as they are displayed on the machine, 50 pixels at a time. A 200x200-pixel image contains 40,000 pixels in total, equaling 200 photographs. I then took all of those photographs and reassembled them in Photoshop, creating a composite image of the photographed LEDs. At a close viewing distance the viewer sees a wall of colored dots fully resolved at 400 dpi, the dots are the LED elements. From a distance, the viewer sees the original bitmap image. This effect is not unlike how a television or Jumbotron works and this is intentional. However, in my work, you see more than the light being emitted since you see the machine producing the light. This makes my work unique, because it not only reveals the machine apparatus creating the image but it also functions as an image of something else.
I situate my work and system alongside the painter Chuck Close, whose way of painting is also dependent upon a system. His photorealistic paintings begin as photographs gridded out. Initially, he is unaware of the final product and he paints the grid space by grid space, mediating that small area. The result is a composite painting that is a myriad of small painted abstract marks but when taken as a whole comprises a figurative portrait of his subject. The system I have developed creates my images. I act as the programmer and provide the raw data, and the computer follows my instructions, piecing my images together in order to create the final photograph.

This body of work was designed to continue the technological advancement in image making, and to reveal a lack of understanding of how the very tools and machines we use to make those images work. I was pushed to photograph the machine in a way that was still beautiful and transcendent, while also revealing the emotional consequence of using the machine. I struggled with the imagery to use in this process, challenged by how to speak to both the emotional and relational side of how technology changes our lives.

Turning to my own relationship for the source material seemed like an obvious choice but not for me. This final step or piece of the *Post Millennium Tension* puzzle was the hardest stage. In making the difficult decision to use my own life meant I could no longer avoid the reality of my relationship. Like Nan Goldin, I have amassed a library of images shared between me and my lover spanning the ins and outs of a relationship; it is this device that hoards and attempts to index them by place, time, and face recognition. Where my work departs from Goldin’s, is with the camera itself. The cell phone is invisible; it has become an inseparable appendage of our bodies and an extension of our brains. There is no need to stage a moment to be recorded, gone is the very presence of the camera, the phone is just always there. At most it is an arm’s length away, waiting to record the images our brains don’t have the storage capacity for.

The taboo of reaching for it to record moments like I did, naked in the embrace of my lover, is long gone. But the image remains translated into information to be stored and recalled whenever I need the reminder of the how I felt in that moment, even when I can never have it again in reality. The choice of these personal images serves as a perfect example of how (a) I am mediating my romantic relationship through technology, and then (b) mediating the
digital record through a process that reflects the device itself and displays an image with the 
residue of the relationship including both the person and the device.

*Post Millennium Tension* visualizes the emotional connection I had with my lover, but it 
also reflects the coded digital residue of its container and a method of viewing and reviewing.

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Installation View, Kiss
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