

## **On Words and Digital Thinking**

*Words cannot escape transformation. Connotations and definitions are transient, mutating as culture develops and time passes. As of late, this process has gone into overdrive. This lexical shift owes itself to digitalisation and globalisation. The way analytical language has transmuted allows us to re-approach previously misunderstood cultural concepts, both artistic and everyday, with an entirely new gaze. Our language has matured and our verbal exchanges are quickening. The blossoming of the cultural canon is incredibly exciting, but one will struggle to escape the exhaustion that comes with trying to effectively process the digitalisation of our words. Monday's debate will be forgotten by Tuesday and we're left running a rat race to stay in the know. The digital pace means that ideas often languish in adolescence, and if they are critiqued, it'll be hastily. There's simply not enough time to process every concept we're confronted with – a problem that breeds emotional thinking, hypocrites and an inability to discern reality from what is false.*

### **Selective Criticism**

In this, the digital era, social criticisms have the tendency to snowball. Ideas move at such a pace that they at times cease to acknowledge the key concepts that precede them, leading to ignorant contradiction. We are easily excited by the idea of social progress, in some instances, wrongly so. Post-colonial theory now defines the cultural canon, permeating many aspects of contemporary art and comment. Post-colonialism is discussed readily, as if the lingering remnants of the global colonial era have been absolved. It appears that post-colonial theory was allowed to take shape, mature and command cultural thinking before the course of decolonisation could ever finish. It is counter-productive, even ignorant to brazenly shout 'post-colonial' in a world still very much bound by the social and economic constraints of the colonial epoch – it simply exposes us as being fearful of objective discussion, reparations and restitution. The leap from de-colonial to post-colonial thinking was unjust, even cruel. Ironically, it left little to no room for healing and progress in an era obsessed with you being the best version of yourself.

### **Communication Woes**

The way we communicate and share information online appears to escape logic, at times favouring the extreme and absurd. Is the fact that we live in an era of collective social irrationality, anxiety and fury the reason why online interactions have become so hyperactive and exaggerated? Could it explain why the 24-hour news cycle insists on force-feeding us a numbing amount of information? The definitive feature of this aspect of modern media is viral culture. Not to argue that the idea of 'viral media' is new, but the fact that the knee-jerk reaction to coming across violent imagery is re-posting it, or the fact that revenge pornography can even be sustained is all testament to the idea that we have approached a new period of communicational regress.

Since the death of African-American seventeen-year-old Trayvon Martin in 2012, the Internet, particularly Twitter has played host to several videos of black people, usually men, dying brutally at the hands of white law enforcement. It became normal to scroll past and maybe watch such a video – audio and all – once, perhaps twice per week. These videos were rarely censored, and the blood, if there was any, ran red and thick, filmed from the dominant perspective of a police officer's body camera. When I visited Arthur Jafa's solo show, *A Series of Utterly Improbable, Yet Extraordinary Renditions* at Berlin's Julia Stoschek Collection for the second time, I was floored – again – by the weight of the images and videos depicting the brutalisation and murder of black people. My reaction was appropriate and exhausting. I was frightened to consider the deadening effect seeing images of this calibre on a near daily basis must have on a person. The images and videos Jafa selected, while shocking, formed a key part of the exhibition's narrative. It was uncomfortable viewing, but it needed to be. In the case of the videos floating around the social media-sphere, the viewing is still uncomfortable, but the casual and reckless manner in which they were published reduces them to being shock-value media, designed to desensitise.

### **Artificial Emotions**

People often joke online about living in a simulation. Today's happenings are so absurd that many seek comfort in the idea that what they are experiencing is in fact computer generated. German-American scientist and professor Joseph Weizenbaum is often lauded as one of the founding fathers of modern artificial intelligence technology. From 1964 to 1966, he created the computer programme ELIZA, 'her' aim being to demonstrate the superficial nature of communication between man and machine. ELIZA could communicate effectively and engage in discourse, and despite many of the participants detailing the programme's human-like feelings; ELIZA was supposedly incapable of intelligent understanding. As the worlds of art, truth and politics conflate, we can easily identify ELIZA's influence. In 2002, Lynn Hershman created the chatbot Agent Ruby, who still inhabits the servers at MOMA San Francisco. Similarly, 2014 saw Cecile B Evans reincarnate Philip Seymour Hoffman as PHIL, an interactive avatar with whom exhibition attendees could chat in *Hyperlinks or It Didn't Happen*. By anthropomorphising robots, we can no longer easily weed what is true from what is false. It is at this point that digitalisation becomes dissociative, as the line between what exists and what doesn't becomes undeterminable. If written and vocalised language is no longer a means of reliable communication, what is?

### **Trumpian Reactivity**

It would be far from callous to suggest that the rampant hyperbole chanted by the bulk of right-wing politicians – both European and American – has lent itself to the present egress of racist vitriol among their constituents. These statements are tremendously influential – regardless of whether they're spoken, published in an article or tweeted – but somehow, it is the words

tweeted that are the most threatening. In a perfect example of digital mobility, Donald Trump's supporters cling desperately to the chronically empty words of their leader, a man who insists on publishing his stream of consciousness. It seems that once a semi-permeable membrane between person and platform is established, all moral responsibility for what we speak is lost. Once words, opinions and thoughts have been digitised, they become eternal. Options include re-tweeting, reposting, screenshotting, copy-and-pasting et cetera. As soon as they are uploaded, opinions spread like biblical fire – regardless of their validity. They're happily relieved of their context and reacted to with visceral, unreasonable emotion.

When it was still young, social media was wildly palatable. Material was abundant and conversation thrived. Fourth-wave feminism, for example, owes its beginnings to people's willingness to start a discussion, be criticised and ask both right and wrong questions. Today, there ceases to be an in-between. Once they are online, your words will either be praised as gospel, or admonished as heresy, and god forbid anyone disagrees with you. As tweeted by multi-disciplinary artist Juliana Huxtable, 'CONTRARIANISM IS NOT THE SAME AS CRITICAL STANCE', a truth happily ignored by many. As the pace of the world increased, our capacity to stop, reflect and question wanes. We're glimpsing tweets and captions quicker than we can form rational opinions, but we're still running with them – I often wonder if this phenomenon is directly responsible for the political disasters that have dominated the news for the past four or so years. We must rethink the boundary between the impact the experience of one person has on another. It's part of the human condition to jump on an interesting enough looking bandwagon. A recent example includes the chaotic manner in which indirect public intervention derailed the trajectory of the Jussie Smollet case. It's time to address the high-octane manner in which Internet happenings are responded to. These reactions have breached the social media sphere, and have a direct, terrifying impact on public matters.

*The way we use language has mutated with such intensity that it at times ceases to be meaningful at all. Today's accelerated turnover of ideas and hyper-analytical approach to the words and imagery we use and share has bred space for progressive insight as well as the dissolution of intellectual integrity, leaving us barely able to question the statements we encounter on a daily basis. There are many open-ended questions as far as this topic is concerned – the most pressing being, in this era of constant scrutiny and development, can our ideas and emotions retain their integrity?*