The Invisible Hand
Simon Denny
exonemo
Sunwoo Hoon & Mijoon Pak
Baden Pailthorpe

Centre for Contemporary Asian Art

1980

1987

The technological devices upon which we rely daily are increasingly prefixed by the word 'smart.' From phones to cars to homes, digital devices respond to our desires with an exacting discernment that tailors our experience of the world. Underpinning this shift in human relations is the rise of global online platform companies—the most prominent being Google, Facebook, Amazon, Apple, Rakuten, Tencent and Naver—that have facilitated the exponential expansion of human communication as our devices generate over 2.5 quintillion bytes of data daily. This phenomenon is analogous to 18th-century economist Adam Smith's concept the 'invisible hand.' His well-known theory contends that unintended consequences of human intervention in market economies creates seismic shifts in history and societies. Smith's invisible hand rests on two foundational premises: that economic actors, from individuals to conglomerates, are self-determined in pursuing their own goals, and that these goals are necessarily self-centered and self-interested.

Global platforms epitomise this self-interest, facilitating online searches, social media and commercial transactions of every kind. These platforms are logging every click, like, share and scroll made on their 'free' services, monetising this data by selling it to third parties such as advertisers at great profit — indeed, their 'product' is us, their users. Rationalised as quid-pro-quo for free services, this business model is creating vast information inequities between users and service providers, creating profound implications for conceptions of privacy and polity.

Nowhere are these invisible computing forces more present than in hyper-connected East Asia, where household internet penetration and use is at its most saturated globally. Bringing this region into focus alongside more local perspectives, the artists exhibiting in *The Invisible Hand* seek to simultaneously untangle and further complicate the networked rhythms of our age with careful allusion to science, public policy and stock markets. Giving form to the contradictions of the digital era, the works in this exhibition propose elliptical responses to key questions that surround this uncertain zero-sum game: *who* has access to new knowledge; *why* do they have the authority to decide; and *how* are these actors enforcing this technology?

Australian artist Baden Pailthorpe's *One and Three PCs* (2019) comprises an elaborate computer system whose sole purpose is to self-generate an image of itself. Using an image-generating AI program called Deep Convolutional General Adversarial Network, Palithorpe's simulacra is a humorous take on the infinite loop of self-referential behavior and a portentous look into a future where the capabilities of AI will surpass human control and understanding. Seducing us with the sheen of its metallic exoskeleton and warm glow of coloured lights, *One and Three PCs* gives external form to its internal programming architecture and in so doing invites probing examination.

Sunwoo Hoon's *The Flat is Political* (2018) highlights the contribution of changing technologies in South Korea's political sphere. Through the format of a vertical 'webtoon', a web-based comic or cartoon form that originated in South Korea, Hoon's work begins with a single pixel that multiplies and aggregates, eventually delineating illustrations that depict moments in the nation's political history. Drawing from the 1980 Gwangju Uprising, a moment that marked the beginning of democratisation, to the recent impeachment of President Park Geun-hye and the #metoo movement, *The Flat is Political* contrasts the ways and means by which citizens connect and congregate in the public realm, tracking a shift from the street to social media.

Against this political backdrop, Sunwoo Hoon and fellow South Korean artist Pak Mijoon's collaboration *Flat Earth* (2019) also employs the form of a webtoon to describe the darker effects of social media and democratic convergence. In a series of pithy images and captions, the artists recount key historical moments of the internet's development, amalgamating scientific fact and science fiction. The result is a series of postulations about the internet's employment to stoke populism, fear monger and manipulate democratic processes.

Working from Tokyo, one of the technology centers of the world, Japanese artist collective exonemo confronts audiences with experiments loaded with conflicted meaning, warning of the dangers in blindly trusting platform companies. Wrapped in the aesthetics of technology, *Kiss, or Dual Monitors* (2017) embodies this message by prompting us to question the verisimilitude of its imagery. In *Live Streams* (2018) the viewer confronts screens with video of the very act of looking, livestreaming the viewer's engagement with the work. Using the front facing camera of the device, one screen is filled with an adoring chorus of online followers that shower the viewer with complementary comments, while the other streams the same view bereft of online attention. This duality—congratulatory and humiliating—reflects our age of anxiety, highlighting the rampant narcissism that defines much online existence.

When speaking of the way the internet has transformed our lives, the impact upon the very people that are involved in its functions is often obscured or ignored. New Zealand-born Simon Denny investigates the way the tech industry subsumes individuals and cities in its operations. Made following an artist's residency in Shenzhen — one of the first of China's special economic zones (SEZ) established in 1980 — *Real Mass Entrepreneurship* (2017) explores the changing world of labour relations with the rise of platform companies. With a macro focus on Huaqiangbei, a sub-district of Shenzhen, Denny presents compelling commentary into the working lives of factory employees and tech entrepreneurs alike. The installation comprises sculptural facsimiles of showcases associated with tech street vendors, alongside recorded interviews with his subjects. *Real Mass Entrepreneurship* draws out the human implications of increased automisation and the relentless drive for innovation that defines Shenzhen's social fabric as a microcosm of a world to come.

In our post-platform age, the course of economics, politics and social relations can be changed in a matter of keystrokes. Against this information landscape, global platform companies hold extraordinary influence while not bearing the same oversight, accountability and responsibility as traditional decision-makers. While the ramifications of this changing digital landscape may seem abstract, the artists in T*he Invisible Hand* give form to the risks and rewards offered by these companies.

Unpacking the central question of the fourth industrial age —the data era— the exhibition artists offer us social commentary, rhetorical pleas and declarative prophecies—culminating in warnings against complacency. How we choose to uncritically adapt or challenge the limits of the value of platform companies will define our collective futures. In the meantime, the fine line between our private and public lives is all but erased.

LIST OF WORKS

Ground floor:
exonemo, *Live Streams*, 2018, T.V. monitors, live cameras, software, dimensions variable. Courtesy the artists.

exonemo, *Kiss, or Dual Monitors*, 2017, HD video, cables, dimensions variable. Courtesy the artists.

Upstairs:

Simon Denny, *Shenzhen Mass Entrepreneurial Huaqiangbei Market Counter in OCT Theme Park Style – Battery*, 2017, airbrush on synthetic plaster, illuminated plinth, 125 x 132 x 68cm. Courtesy the artist and Fine Arts, Sydney.

Simon Denny, *Real Mass Entrepreneurship*, 2017, video, 14:23. Courtesy the artist and Fine Arts, Sydney.

Simon Denny, *Shenzhen innovation paradigm – Mass Entrepreneurship – 2*, New Rixing K7 Wireless Microphone & HIFI Speaker, laser cut airbrush stencils, UV print on plexiglas, laser cut mdf, 2017, 75 x 120 x 20 cm. Courtesy the artist and Fine Arts, Sydney.

Sunwoo Hoon, *Flat is the new deep*, 2018, digital drawing, dimensions variable. Commissioned by the Gwangju Biennale, 2018 with support from Christina H. Kang. Courtesy the artist.

Sunwoo Hoon and Mijoon Pak, *Flat Earth*, 2019, digital drawing, dimensions variable. Commissioned by 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art, Sydney, Australia. Courtesy the artists.

Baden Pailthorpe, *One and Three PCs*, 2019, digital imagery produced by a DCGAN machine learning algorithm, various LED screens, In-Win Z Tower, Threadripper 2970WX, ASUS ROG Zenith Extreme Alpha, G.Skill Trident Z RGB 64GB, 2 x AMD Radeon VII, 2 x WD Black 1TB NVMe, ASUS ROG Thor 1200W Platinum, Thermaltake Ring Trio, CableMod Pro Sleeved Cables, Custom 7″ screen (running Aida64). PC build: Stuart Tonks, GGF LAN Party; AI assistance: Dr Charles Gretton, ANU; Kieran Browne, ANU; Network architecture by Radford et al., 2015. Code: https://github.com/gsurma/image_generator. Commissioned by 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art, Sydney, Australia. Supported by In-win. Courtesy the artist and Sullivan+Strumpf, Sydney.

EXHIBITION ARTISTS:
Simon Denny
exonemo
Sunwoo Hoon and Mijoon Pak
Baden Pailthorpe

CURATOR:
Micheal Do

CURATORIAL ASSISTANT:
Isabel Rouch

**To find out more about The Invisible Hand public programs, artists and more, visit:
4a.com.au/the-invisible-hand/**

The Invisible Hand

28 June – 4 August 2019