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07: Portraits

I Can't Do that, Dave. Artificial Intelligence, Dada and the Ethics of Perception

ARE HUMANS WORTHY TO CREATE MORE POWERFUL BEINGS IN OUR OWN IMAGE? ESSAY.

🕔 16/02/2016   👤 Michael Eden   🗁 Society
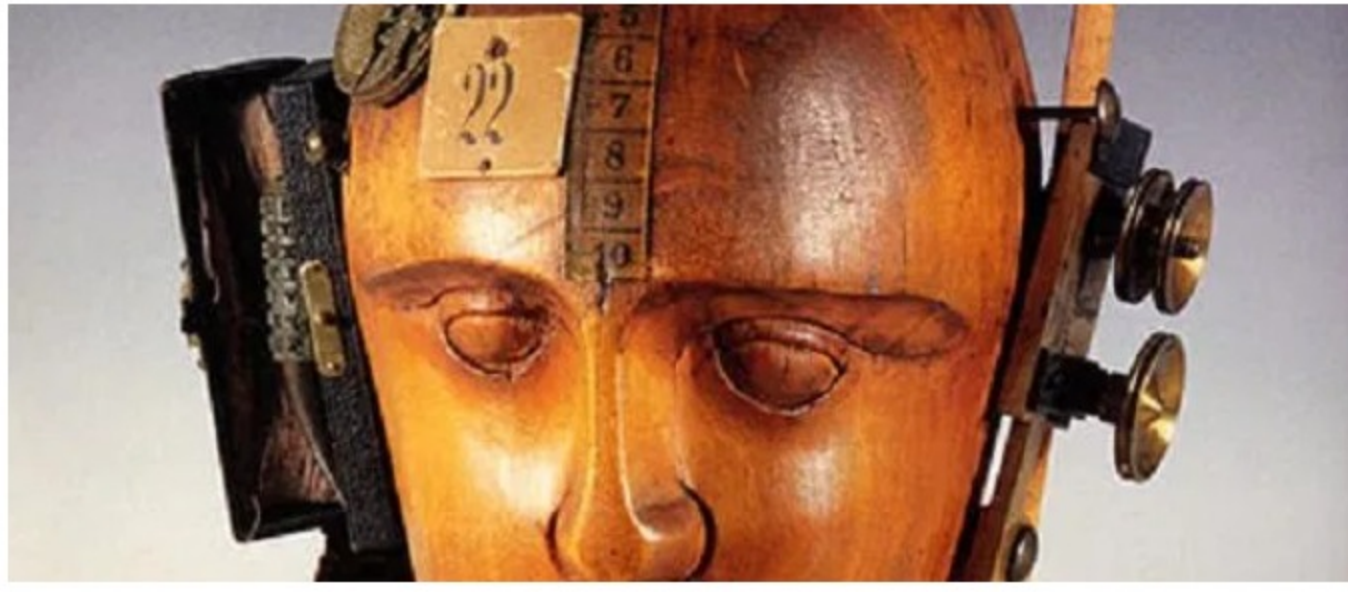
Examining the unpredictable and disruptive possibilities contained within new technologies, as prompted by Toshiba Research Europe/Cambridge University's Digital Head project, is a task which benefits from outside perspectives.

Initial reactions now recorded (and available to peruse in '**Digital Head and the Ethics of Intelligence**'), I wrote to Björn Stenger, head of the 'Zoe Digital Head' research project and put some ideas to him:

You mentioned AI (possibly embedded within biological tissue) and creating a sentient being. It may be interesting to think about the definition of 'sentient' and what we as humans understand as 'intelligent'.

Björn Stenger: The term 'sentient' by definition means being 'able to perceive and feel things'. For me there is no question that the ability of machines to perceive is going to improve and in many ways surpass human ability.

Think of the ability to process large amounts of text, **sound**, and images. Or think about sensors beyond the human range of perception (infrared light or ultrasound). These tasks will be much easier for machines than for humans.

In the **future** there will be more and more work on integrating different senses, on including environmental context, and understanding communication – dialogues and building 'mental models'.

When talking about 'feeling' it gets a bit more ambiguous. Clearly a machine cannot feel as such. However, it could be programmed to display the same *behaviour* as if it felt a certain emotion. To the outside observer there may be little or no difference. It may be similar with people: We believe other people have feelings because we (believe we) have them ourselves.

Possibly one of the roles of mirror neurons in the human **brain** is to promote understanding of others' expressions and trigger responses such as empathy. If the 'other' is sufficiently realistic to trigger this response, our recognition system may be fooled. What is considered 'intelligent' behaviour is bound to change in the future.

In the past it might have been considered 'intelligent' for a machine to play a chess game. It turned out that this was a relatively easy problem, since it's well-defined. By looking ahead several moves and possibly using some historic data, computers can now easily beat chess grandmasters. Other seemingly easy problems are much harder, e.g. recognising a cat on a sofa or understanding a conversation over a noisy phone connection. We are now living in times when machines become able to solve these kinds of problems.

There has been immense progress recently, but there is still a gap to fill to achieve human-level performance. Basically whenever a task can be clearly defined, there is likely a way to solve this task with a machine.

You also wrote about the social impact of technologies (designer babies, internet porn, traffic accidents). That is an interesting area of course. It is difficult to predict impact of technology since it is difficult to predict the way people will use or behave with new technology. This may show more about the facets of human **nature** than about technology itself. The consequences however, may be amplified through technology.

I sent Björn a copy of Raoul Hausmann's famous image 'Mechanical Head (The Spirit of Our Time' as an example of where we were as a culture at the beginning of the 20th century, wondering what he would make of the symbolic implications of his own work. To fully grasp the meaning of this gesture it would be useful to take a slight detour into the Dada movement and the state of play in **Europe** in the first half of the last century.

The Dada movement was born out of a bitter disappointment with early 20th century European society and began as a protest against the First World War. The agents of that movement maintained a strong anti-war theme and desired to bring about the end of the bourgeoisie through a reworking of creative processes, which in turn would rework the subjectivity of men and **women**:

"We had lost confidence in our culture. Everything had to be demolished. We would begin again after the tabula rasa"

– Marcel Janco, artist.

Janco wanted to move away from only using traditional skill the acquisition of which for the Dada movement was a double edged sword as it required a ridged way of thinking and reinforced elitist institutions, he opposed this with what Hans Richter saw as the truly empowering aspect of Dada:
"You all know what Dada is; Dada is what you can make out of yourself…"

The grand narratives which had hitherto guaranteed meaning and provided a sense of purpose for European peoples now began to fracture, it seemed to the Dadaists that all the art, philosophy, politics, and reason of the past had failed to pull man out of the barbaric mire and had only served to create new opportunities for mass killing and general malaise.

Even science with its detached logic, which was expected to free people from the superstition and xenophobia religion seemed to support, had been made a slave to the inevitability of greed and the desire for power. It had failed to rework man, failed to open new spaces for people to inhabit and instead simply provided efficient killing machines and eugenic possibilities.

It's difficult to fully inhabit this mentality, as first, you must feel that art can rework man for the better, that the creation and appreciation of it can make us better people. Following that, you must have this conviction destroyed in the most traumatic way, by war and mass killing. Worse, you must face the broad acceptance of this from so-called rational, civilised people.

Educated and privileged men controlled Europe. They were exposed to the highest thinking and to the greatest masterpieces of art. The morality and sentiment contained in so many great works (illustrated above by Goya's 'The Third of May 1808') had not undermined the kind of conviction required to order killings and go 'over the top' into machine gun fire.

This tension gave birth to the post-modern era, and Dadaism seems like the actualisation of postmodernism (at least an actualisation of postmodernism in its radical form, breaking down stale conventions and empowering the disenfranchised with irreverent, whimsical and inconsistent zeal). Despite our modern associations with visual puns and our general 'at ease' with surrealism due to animation and advertising, we must struggle to see the Dadaist movement in the context of this impossible tension, rather than, the trite cynicism that post-modernism has solidified into today.

Considering the work of the aforementioned Raoul Hausmann (July 12, 1886 – February 1, 1971) brings us back to our original subject: the digital head. Hausmann, an Austrian artist and writer, created a bitter **satire** of his wounded countrymen. Speaking of his most famous work 'Mechanical Head', Hausmann said that the average German:
"has no more capabilities than those which chance has glued on the outside of his skull; his brain remains empty".

The inevitable question arises: have we yet developed sufficiently as an intelligent **species** to engender, albeit 'artificially', another?

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ART   ETHICS   POINTY HEADS   SOCIETY   TECHNOLOGY

About Michael Eden · 77 Articles

Michael Eden is the Arts Editor for Trebuchet Magazine, an artist and researcher working in London and the south east, his artistic practice is concentrated on painting and he divides his time between this and lecturing in art history and contextual studies.

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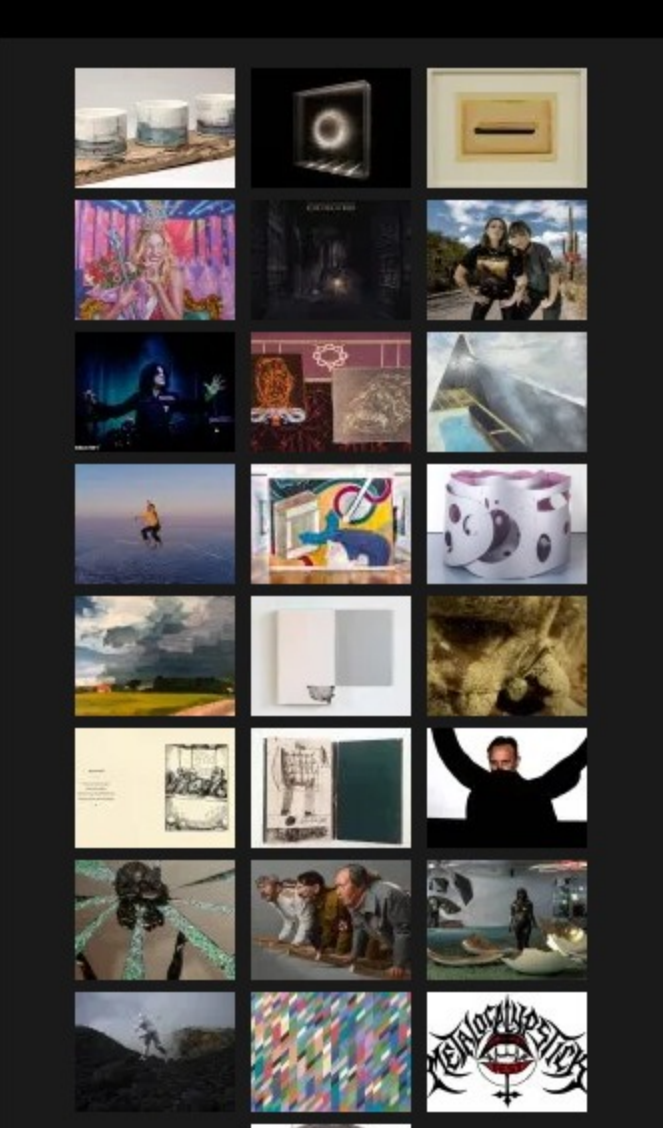
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