

Teun Grondman

De Appel, BRACE FOR IMPACT, Node #1, Mehraneh Atashi and Samson Young, 20 April – 20 May

As I enter De Appel the lady behind the ticket register tells me sternly 'Don't touch anything, because it's all high voltage', which makes me wonder if someone touching something during the days before warranted this verbal warning. I say that I would try not to, I say 'Thank you' and enter the half-basement which is the exhibition space. First, I'm greeted with an introductory text that takes me a while to absorb.

*Affective stimulation is often registered in terms of an event with a cause and effect, or tension finding release. Less perceptible are states of prolonged anxiety that exist as a humdrum sense of foreboding. How do we account for these mundane forces that are neither forecasted nor have a clear source? How are modern humans shaped by tensions that find no release? [...]*

*A humdrum sense of foreboding.* I recognise that feeling. A sinister feeling about the world, of instability, untenability, but caused by what exactly? I guess technology definitely has something to do with that unease, probably, maybe, right? I walk into the exhibition space to find answers.

The room contains various intricate installations and the left wall is lined with half a dozen framed A4 drawings. The floor is covered with a huge graphic, in an adjacent room a video is being shown. My first association is 'noise': humming and rattling comes from the installations and the video in the other space, the complex floor coverage which on first viewing appears as a datamoshed Adobe Illustrator Image-Traced mess – and then the drawings, which look like human attempts at ordering and displaying auditory noise, in appearance not unlike a graphical notation score by John Cage or some other experimental composer. The drawings, by Samson Young, display utterings like *Cha – o, Bee Bee Dee Dee, Wu-ah, Fffu Fffu, Distant engine* or *Captain with toy car*. It seems as if Young, lost in noise, desperately tried to make sense of his mostly industrial surroundings. A human stuck in a web of processes they can only partly comprehend.

There are three installations in the space, all of them by Mehraneh Atashi. I turn to the most prominent one, a table with various devices all interacting with each other. An audio interface is connected to an electrical setup that produces loud, rattling lightning sparks, the wires of which are heated and blackened by the flame of an oil candle, all of which is being filmed and subsequently projected with a projector, which shines through the whole setup, through a rotating gemstone, onto the opposing wall. The spark of electricity is the outstanding element, continuously making high-frequency noise with only the occasional short pause.

The second installation, bounded to the first one by the rays of the projector and the graphical floor, consists, among other things, of a rusty bike frame (seemingly retrieved from the bottom of an Amsterdam canal), bright lights, a flamingo blanket and a plate with a tiny cymbal-banging monkey toy. The monkey is connected to an electronic micro-processor unit. Evoking some feelings of decay and cheap materialism, this installation is less conspicuous in its meaning and behaviour than the first one.

Walking through the works, and it does feel like walking *through*, I start to wonder what my role in all of this is. The room gives off a sense of interconnectedness, interactivity, though I have no clue about my function in the machine. I remember that I'm not allowed to touch anything. The moving elements have a behaviour, but it is unclear how they respond to me, or for that matter, to each other. I can only observe what is happening, but I can't get a hold on all of it.

The last installation, not beamed upon by the projector nor standing on the graphic floor, reclusively does its own thing in a corner. A wax hand, a dangling stained sheet, and a landscape of forest dirt on opalescent fabric that moves steadily up and down. Another combination of some artificial machinery and decay-like natural processes, with no obvious role for the human standing in between.

In a separate room, I see a video from the perspective of a container ship approaching land on an overcast day. You can hear the sea and the engine, and sailors yelling important information at each other. As the ship moors, it becomes clear how big the ship is, or rather, how small the buildings at the coast. The ship is operating at its own level of scale, way beyond the level of the humans living in the tiny houses along the shore. And even though I can hear people yelling commands, I feel as though the people are just following the commands of the ship, and the even bigger machine of logistical industrial distribution connected to it.

How do we come to grips with this confusion? What are these technological processes Young and Atashi talk about and how do we relate to them? All works depict a process to some extent, but also seem to exclude the human. A machinal runaway feedback loop that firstly serves itself. Then, on the floorplan in my hand, I discover a space that I hadn't noticed before, a tucked-away crevice in the first room. In it, I discover a small screen showing a video of a man playing guitar and singing on a marketplace. It seems like nobody is listening to him, except for the camera. His playing is definitely not the most sophisticated, but there is a sincere and almost desperate look in his eyes. He strains his voice to reach the high notes. The sound, even from up close, is faint and easily overpowered by the noisy machines. As I walk away from him I keep hearing the refrain however, even all the way from the other side of the exhibition space. Suddenly there's a human expression coming through all the noise. I realise that this singer is essential. He might offer some form of release for my 'humdrum sense of foreboding'.