

Frictionless: Dan McCabe

Essay by Guy Loudon for the exhibition
Post Leisure: Dan McCabe, at Outer Space
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In the early nineties Bill Gates began using the term "frictionless capitalism". He imagined technology making exchange radically fast and easy. Capital would be fully networked. The market would transcend the old inconveniences of the physical world. It would become weightless, wireless, and ubiquitous.

Today, trillion-dollar tech firms trade in this market, and their work is everywhere. Their frictionless ideal is embodied in high-end consumer devices. Sleek and seamless, a smartphone or tablet is otherworldly in its detached perfection. Their smooth surfaces are unmarked by tradition and the weight of experience.

Dan McCabe's *Post Leisure* adopts the materiality of these devices. It arranges their features into precise ideal forms. Compositionally, the artworks mirror the structure of a tablet computer, with a glass panel floating over a painted steel frame. Automotive paint grips the glass underside, suspending an utterly flat image between chassis and screen. At each corner, the metal curves away in an elegant bevel. Security screws pin the pieces, drawing the shear elements together under tension.

The works make symbols of the defining artefacts of our age. In their austere elegance, these objects are strangely menacing. Like a smartphone, their frictionless perfection calls out to some other shadowy form. Some place where the

industry and labour behind the object does register physically. To sweatshop suicides and rare-earth mines, smelting and smog, a vast churning of animal and mineral complexity. Frictionless capitalism has a monstrous footprint.

In Apple products, technology is likened to magic. Surface and interface are privileged, while the working realities of the tech are concealed. In *Post Leisure*, McCabe references this in his use of specialist security screws. Apple uses such fasteners to close-off the interiors of their devices to their owners. An iPhone aspires to a pure surface sheen – a terminal minimalism determined to disappear.

McCabe's artworks reflect this drive: they are all-surface, all the way down. Each piece in *Post Leisure* shows a brain scan of a mind in thought – someone solving cryptic crosswords, reading, or playing jazz, and so on. The viewer must rely on the work's titles to know which, because the images appear totally abstract. Pressed into a surface between glass and steel, they show the way technology can reframe thought. The mind has been sliced and flattened into something inhuman. It is measured, reframed, and instrumentalised by technology. Even the most intangible moments of the psyche become images, as in *Religion* (2019), which shows religious experiences in fMRI.

Increasingly we rely on computers to help us think. They analyse vast datasets and output comprehensible summaries. We value their capacity to turn information into options. When they are placed in our personal electronic devices, as virtual assistants and app algorithms, they are

integrated into our thinking at an everyday level, becoming externally stored parts of the mind. In this way they shape our thinking, and our mode of thought comes to resemble that of the computer. In McCabe's works this anchors a central ambiguity, about whether they show a computer in thought, or a human's computational manner of thinking.

The robo-debt controversy demonstrated how this type of computational thinking becomes a real-world problem. Its algorithmic system misunderstood the human factor in the equation, applying hard data to the variable personal contexts of the most vulnerable citizens. The scheme was politically attractive because it promised efficiencies, but it was ethically tolerable because people tend to trust an algorithm, to see such tech as inherently unbiased.

Computational thought is, of course, not at all neutral. An algorithm or artificial intelligence is as biased as the data and code on which it is based. Indeed, though they are best trained on huge datasets, they often learn most from statistically relevant information. This means they have the tendency to concentrate its patterns. Recall "Tay", the Microsoft Twitter bot that became a genocidal troll in just 16 hours. AI is, in fact, a grotesque reflection of humanity. Unless we understand this, we risk the grotesque becoming normalised, in a feedback loop that reaches back out into our world.

Post Leisure poses the idea that an artificial intelligence could have a life beyond its instrumental utility. But the works depict this intelligence as abstract and inscrutable – the advanced

AI that eventually emerges will not necessarily be recognisable and human-like at all. Famously, we measure AI by its ability to pass as human – the Turing test. But there is no reason a computerised mind should align with our human understandings of intelligence.

If we are to recognise artificial intelligence, even of a thoroughly non-human sort, we must consider what it means to exploit that intelligence. Today's Siri, Alexa, and Cortana are our servants. They exist to smooth our relation to the petty conveniences of frictionless capitalism. To place them in this position reinforces the traditions of class subjection and colonial history. This is alarming, because our exploitative relationship with such technology bleeds out beyond frictionless space. It shapes the way we think and relate to one another in the wider world. Post Leisure questions the effects of our relationship with technology. The sleek surfaces of McCabe's works belie a messier, murkier, interior reality.

Guy Loudon