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Exhibition Review: *Age of You*

Age of You: Museum of Contemporary Art. Toronto, Canada: September 5, 2019–January 5, 2020.

Age of You is a multimedia exhibition that took place at Toronto’s Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA). The exhibit, co-curated by Shumon Basar, Douglas Coupland, and Hans Ulrich Obrist, featured the works of seventy-two contemporary artists, designers, filmmakers, and musicians. The show aimed to address the ongoing metamorphosis of human individuality in the age of advancing technology. It analyzed how technology affects contemporary human experience, behavior, and identity, while proposing that we have become “extreme” versions of ourselves. Basar, Coupland, and Obrist suggested that our current “extreme” selves are hybridized with the data that we consume and create. The exhibit proposed that our society is facing an existential dilemma—the loss of human individuality in an era where we have become the content creators, curators, and vendors of our own identity. Social media is the space where we construct and play out that identity. *Age of You* interpreted this social flux as disquieting through an experience that positioned its audience as metaphorical spectators of a fictive Instagram feed.



IMAGE 1. Installation view of *Age of You* (2019) curated by Douglas Coupland, Shumon Basar, and Hans Ulrich Obrist at Museum of Contemporary Art Toronto (MOCA Toronto); courtesy of Museum of Contemporary Art Toronto; © 2019 photograph by Tom Arban Photography Inc.

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Each visual component in the exhibit conveyed an aspect of current human experience affected by and lived through technology, including self-image, politics, intimacy, democracy, and interpersonal relationships. The exhibit asked its audience to reflect on their own individuality, and to question how involved they are in the dystopic reality that our society has normalized. The exhibition de facto positioned its viewers to contemplate how the artworks, most of which convey a poignant, short text, perform as a mirror that reveals the “you” in *Age of You*.

Age of You did not look like a standard white cube art exhibit. Its works, despite being authored by different artists, did not display as independent bodies carrying idiosyncratic messages. *Age of You*'s multiple works instead performed as fragments. They behaved similarly to Instagram Stories posts—the building blocks of a social media narrative featuring images and videos. Here, that narrative declared that technology has altered human identity toward a decline. Basar, Coupland, and Obrist were in the forefront of the exhibition as the curators and “content creators” of this narrative, which they previously explored in their book *The Age of Earthquakes: A Guide to the Extreme Present* (2015). This earlier work attempted to extend the analysis of Marshall McLuhan's *The Medium is the Message: An Inventory of Effects* (1967) to reflect the twenty-first-century present.

The Medium is the Message is a photo book, co-created with the illustrator Quentin Fiore. In it, McLuhan outlined that we live in a time where technology has become an extension of the human senses, and proposed that our sense of self has become inextricably linked to the media. McLuhan argued that

All media work us over completely. They are so pervasive in their personal, political, economic, aesthetic, psychological, moral, ethical, and social consequences that they leave no part of us untouched, unaffected, unaltered. The medium is the message. Any understanding of social and cultural change is impossible without a knowledge of the way media work as environments. All media are extensions of some human faculty—psychic or physical.¹

Almost fifty years after McLuhan's publication, *The Age of Earthquakes* took his principal arguments and positioned them in the twenty-first century to reflect the advent of the internet and social media.

Age of You was a reexamination of the theories presented in *The Age of Earthquakes*, and was also in part influenced by the Cambridge Analytica scandal in early 2018. The company, along with Facebook, were held liable for harvesting millions of users' personal Facebook data without their consent to target political advertisements. Cambridge Analytica's actions are believed to have influenced Donald Trump's election and Brexit in 2016. In an interview, Basar stated that since these occurrences, “any innocent relationship we may have had to the data that we produced has been obliterated and that data has now become the most valuable resource in the world.”² For the *Age of You*'s curators, that was a turning point that

1. Marshall McLuhan and Quentin Fiore, “The Medium is the Message: An Inventory of Effects” (Corte Madera: Gingko Press Inc., 1967), 26.

2. Eva Munz, “Interview: Shumon Basar Talks ‘Age of You’ Exhibition and the Extreme Self,” *Pin-up Magazine*, <https://pinupmagazine.org/articles/interview-shumon-basar-the-age-of-you-moca-toronto-extreme-self-eva-munz#10>.

led to a reevaluation of our relationship with technology. We became aware that crucial global events were not necessarily accidental, but possibly engineered. That awareness begged the question of whether our human emotions are authentic, or if they have been engineered by someone, or something else. *Age of You* was a preview, an abridged visual version of *The Extreme Self*, the trio's forthcoming book that will explore these theories.

The exhibit was divided into thirteen chapters, each one mimicking a chapter in the yet-to-be published *The Extreme Self*. *Age of You* was experienced like a narrative. In it, the curators were the authors, and the viewers were the readers navigating MOCA's spaces. The exhibit spanned across two floors of the museum. When viewers entered the exhibition space, they were confronted with a large, industrial space where dozens of large photography panels were suspended from the ceilings. They were interspersed throughout the entire space, and formed a route marked with the numbers one through thirteen on the floor of the gallery. The markings suggested that the viewer follow this sequence on a journey that would take them through the chapters, each of which explored different aspects of our relationship with technology and the media.



IMAGE 2. Installation view of *Age of You* (2019) curated by Douglas Coupland, Shumon Basar, and Hans Ulrich Obrist at Museum of Contemporary Art Toronto. Background: Craig Green x Moncler Genius, *Campaign for 5 Moncler Craig Green SS19 Collection* (2018); courtesy of Museum of Contemporary Art Toronto (MOCA Toronto); © 2019 photograph by Tom Arban Photography Inc.

Each chapter of the exhibition was introduced with a single suspended placard, approximately the size of a person, which featured the chapter's number, its title, and subtitle. The chapters' introductory placards resembled a page from a book—a white background featuring black text. The beginning of the curators' narrative was indicated by a white panel with the text "1. Am I?" Written below was the subtitle "You are disintegrating." The first chapter, titled "1. Am I?," confronted viewers with the issue of the loss of selfhood and individuality. Suspended beside the placard were four photography panels of the same size. Aligned, as aforementioned, they resembled an Instagram Stories post—a lineup of standardized, graphically appealing images that form a curated narrative. The choice to present the works this way took the focus away from the artists' identities, and placed it on the curators of the experience. The second placard, designed by Wang Haiyang, showed a black-and-white image of a man looking into a handheld mirror. He beheld an augmented and featureless version of himself; superimposed on the top and the center of the image was the statement "We were wondering . . . Do you feel like an individual?" The panel beside it, resembling a social media post, read: "Twenty years ago this question would have made no sense. Now everybody knows what it means. We all know that we're changing inside our heads. Quickly. Too quickly. Up until recently people were simply people. Now we're turning into something else. We all feel it."

Much of the remaining artwork took on the same formal qualities, with the exception of a few video works and three-dimensional installation pieces, highlighting the curators' intent to mimic a digital social media experience. The following chapter, "2. Fame and the Face," bore the subtitle "You are really somebody." The titles of the chapters, along with their subtitles, aimed to reference our current anxieties. McLuhan attributed these anxieties to an inability to resolve how to belong in a quickly mutating social environment, writing that, "Innumerable confusions and a profound feeling of despair invariably emerge in periods of great technological and cultural transitions. Our 'Age of Anxiety' is, in great part, the result of trying to do today's job with yesterday's tools and yesterday's concepts."³

The second chapter of the exhibition aimed to tackle issues of personal identity, how much agency we have in cultivating it, and its authenticity. Two photographic panels displayed side by side expressed this theme in writing. One of them conveyed the statement "She said her followers drive her to post more pictures of herself. She deletes the ones that don't instantly please. She wants the crowd to curate her image. She doesn't know them but she trusts them. She's molded by their unfiltered preferences. She knows exactly how to make the algorithm love her." Besides this placard hung a different one, designed by Fatima Al Qadiri, bearing the image of a heavily made-up woman, superimposed on which was the statement "The opposite of fame is no longer anonymity. The opposite of nobody is no longer somebody."

The third chapter, "3. Intimacy Industrial Complex," was followed with the subtitle "You're nothing like your profile pic," and it explored how technology has altered intimate relationships. The panel beside the introduction, designed by Anna Uddenberg, showed an image of a woman bending over, her body appearing contorted and discarded, her clothing

3. McLuhan and Fiore, "The Medium is the Message," 8–9.

up around her waist, her face hidden. The image of the woman, reminiscent of a crime-scene photograph, featured the text “Dating sounds as old fashioned as courting. Chaste, consequence-free messaging, communal lapping, asexual cuddling and body contact negotiated through legalistic consent dialogues, all followed by ghosting. The relationship’s never over, because it never really started.” In this chapter, the curators turned the audience’s attention toward the emotional and psychological effects technology has had on the individual. Basar, Coupland, and Obrist highlighted the increasing ambiguity of social relationships, and the resulting anxieties that we develop from these uncertainties.

The following chapters, “4. Post Work: ‘You are dispensable’”; “5. The Comments Section is the Real World: ‘You are a deleted comment’”; and “6. The New Crowd: ‘You are multiplying,’” move away from the individual to examine how the collective is affected by new technologies. In these chapters, the curators investigated how the concept of the crowd has become unclear. In an interview, Basar asked what kind of a crowd does an individual create and belong in if each person inhabits a different virtual reality. He suggests that, in the past, a crowd was a collection of physical bodies in a physical space.⁴ Precious Okoyomon’s placard from Chapter Six defined a crowd as an ambiguous amalgam, posing the questions “Do you feel safe in a crowd? Do you feel in danger in a crowd? Do you feel alone in a crowd? Do you form bonds in a crowd? When does a crowd become a mob? Is a social movement a global crowd? Is it hard to be an individual when being part of a crowd has never been easier?”

In the subsequent chapters, the exhibition focused on the actions and effects of a virtual crowd. In the chapters “7. Micro-Othering/Microfascism: ‘You are triggered’”; “8. Virtue Power: ‘You are righteous . . .’”; and “9. Inner Revolution: ‘You are on a journey . . .’” topics such as outrage culture and the agency to express one’s opinion and actions were explored with familiar visual cues as the viewer ascended to the second floor of the exhibition. In his

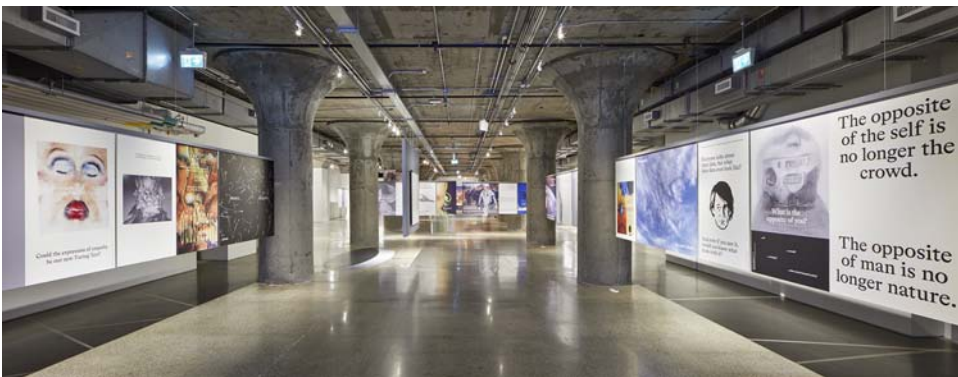


IMAGE 3. Installation view of *Age of You* (2019) curated by Douglas Coupland, Shumon Basar, and Hans Ulrich Obrist at Museum of Contemporary Art Toronto (MOCA Toronto); courtesy of Museum of Contemporary Art Toronto; © 2019 photograph by Tom Arban Photography Inc.

4. Eva Munz, “Interview: Shumon Basar Talks ‘Age of You’ Exhibition and the Extreme Self,” *Pin-up Magazine*, <https://pinupmagazine.org/articles/interview-shumon-basar-the-age-of-you-moca-toronto-extreme-self-eva-munz#10>.

placard from Chapter Seven, Yuri Pattison presented an image of an unmade bed atop which a laptop illuminated a dark room. Superimposed on the image read the text “If the twentieth century taught us just one thing, it’s that when technology changes too quickly, people tend to make really bad decisions. People who feel as if they’re in too much chaos can be tricked into doing almost anything.”

The remaining chapters, “10. The 0.001%: ‘You deserve it all!’”; “11. The End of Democracy: ‘You are over-empowered’”; “12. Wizards and Charismatics: ‘You are godlike’”; and “13. Towards the End: ‘You are alive for the moment’” aimed to describe how media platforms have been instrumental in engineering people’s opinions, actions, and choices. A real example of this conclusion took place in 2018, when Cambridge Analytica and Facebook faced a public scandal for their involvement in engineering political votes from an unassuming public. Having grave implications on the state of contemporary democracy, the curators point to current media as a force that could have gone beyond its users’ control.

Basar, Coupland, and Obrist’s exhibition indicated a grim prognosis for the future of a society that is engineering, and living within, an algorithm. The curators and contributors conveyed that we are living in a time of existential unrest due to the rapid changes caused by new technologies—a theory that McLuhan presented more than fifty years ago. *Age of You* established that McLuhan’s description of the anxieties of the world in 1967 have not ceased, but rather intensified due to recent technological advancements. Since *Age of You* was navigated similarly to a social media story, the images performed like fragments in a narrative, and their medium became the message. ■

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