Fulcrum

physical digitality.

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Addressing the physical manifestation of the internet is hardly a new topic. There has been a lot said on the evolution of devices, the effects of cloud computing on privacy, the data centres required and their energy consumption. There has also been endless debate on our constantly connected and recorded existence. But what I would like to raise here is the extent to which the very way we relate to the physical world, and the manner we posit ourselves in space, is being dramatically challenged by the internet. The consequences are far from insignificant, as they fundamentally challenge things like work, identity and property.

A first example could be the spatial strategy developed by the company Automattic behind Wordpress, a digital edition platform present on 18% of all internet traffic. The particularity is that the company isn't actually based anywhere. None of the 209 employees go to an office in the morning. Rather, "everyone works from their own home or office, and we're spread out all over the world [...] We track about 70% of our projects on WordPress.com blogs, 25% on private IRC channels, and the rest on Skype or AIM." The work is produced by these solitary workers at a distance. When there is the need to meet physically, the company flies the employees to whichever location is most adequate (with high-speed internet, and if possible sun and beach). Expenditure on flights is roughly equivalent to office rent anyway, although this method is undoubtedly more exciting — not least because, from a human capital standpoint, they are able to hire the most qualified workers, regardless of their location, their family, or their visa situation. The company still provides an open-vacation policy, some healthcare, and covers the cost of hardware, software and home-office or co-working space. Even if this spatial scheme could only be applicable to a few specific businesses, it is representative of a certain shift which alters life in general: the way we conceive our identity, how we belong to society and what is our sensory position in the world.

The existentially fundamental sentiment of identity and belonging are not dependent on a fixed location anymore.

The possibility to feel as such does not rely on a specific space, or, I should say, on a physical space, on a territory. The sociability that has developed in the space of the internet obeys different laws than the sociability in the physical realm. This other sociability is now forcing some of its mechanisms onto pre-digital behaviours. I believe that most of the friction between the two entities emerges from divergent conceptualisations of space. Some of the most fundamental concepts of modern subjectivity are heavily reliant on a particular aesthetic that grounds itself in the permanence of our relationships to material things, like property, or national identity. To a certain extent, the struggle between the physical and digital subjectivities is the continuation of Walter Benjamin's famous warning in The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction. Only now it has reached another dimension. Benjamin wrote his text in 1935, when reproducible media were booming — in the form of print, photography, records, radio and films. He argued that they would inevitably carry a heavy political potency, whether evident or latent, because of their very reproducible nature. In short, what Benjamin explains is that the ability of a 'thing' to reach a mass of people confers to that 'thing' great political powers and thus the potential to greatly effect Life. This process has been exemplified in recent years by the Arab spring, Wikileaks and the Anonymous cyber-attacks. However, even if they are important events, I am less interested in these manifestations of politics than the ones pertaining to the digitisation of goods and of everyday social interactions. The most profound consequences of the internet lay in habits. Aren't you physically listening to music, or watching that movie, after downloading it free from a peer-to-peer service? Can't you spend the money wired through Paypal? And aren't you desiring that app on iTunes? Remember, you actually had a child with that person you met on OkCupid, TaskRabbit and Tumblr. Perhaps this sounds trivial because it sounds mundane, yet these realities are the ones to observe.

The internet lets me exchange information instantly, regardless of the location. It allows me to understand, appreciate and genuinely relate to what a person from Buenos Aires does even though I might be from Moscow. The reason why I am actually in Chicago at the moment is because the skills and tastes that I learnt in London are valuable there. It is a shame that I can't get more than a year Visa though. I like it here, I like this house and my friends. But it's okay, I wouldn't settle here anyway, I also know that I could very well find myself at home in Hong Kong. Or Shanghai. They've just lifted the Facebook ban in that city. My identity doesn't rely on any location in particular and moving is easy. My laptop, passport and credit card, I can find the rest wherever. I know that in every city of the world there are a few potential friends, not only because they listen to the same music but because they conceptualise love, space and time just like me. The internet is a place of its own. I am from there, they are too. Not from the whole thing of course. I belong to a small neighbourhood within the internet, just like my grand-parents were from the small village of Figeac in France. I bet they knew as many people as I do, they just knew them differently.

The digital subject hasn't overcome the bourgeois subjectivity that constructed the land and the house as the main means of existential fulfilment. Nonetheless, he has shifted these things through the space of the internet. The house doesn't contain the belongings which define identity, and is not the space that guarantees your social status anymore. Home is your computer, your cloud storage and your profiles and avatars. They are more permanent than a local pub. Because the locus of identity has shifted onto the internet, the house is now merely hardware. I change house like I change smart-phone. I fill it with my stuff as soon as I get a new one. The devices may have different forms and features, but they always fulfil same basic functions. Privacy-sleep-eat-wash echoes connect-talk-text-snap. The development of internet sociability has modified the way through which we conceptualise the physical world and our presence within it. Our condition has evolved, connectivity has joined entropy and gravity.

The very manner we relate to things, whether they have a physicality or not, tends to equally endorse the aesthetic of the digital.

It means that we increasingly exist through the sensory-emotional reflexes that emerged on the internet. Since birth, I have been consuming digital goods by sharing them with people I don't know, therefore I am able to CouchSurf, CarPool and CoWork. If you are on Spotify, you likely have a ZipCar membership. It's a fact, just like the Belgians like beer. The international and territory-less aesthetic of the digital organises our existences, whether social or material. Ownership as we know it is at stake, since it relies on permanence and place. It is irrelevant to apply the ownership formulated for physical objects to digital ones. It doesn't work, and anyway I don't relate to digital goods like I relate to physical ones: what does "owning" mean if I can give you a song and also keep it? I want access to things only when I need them. Ownership is too much hassle.

The Nation-State cannot produce such a sense of identity as Apple or Twitter. The welfare system is incoherent, with digital up-rootedness and the shared economy. I pay taxes in France, use UK healthcare, live in Berlin, make money in NYC, Mexico and Bangkok. I sometimes wish they all paid in BitCoins. However, I consistently use Google, Facebook, Amazon, AirBnB and Easyjet, wherever I am. The NSA knows very well that these companies are the main carriers of identity, and that passports are resistant ideology. I don't have an address, only a name and email. I will never desire to own a house or car, but I will always have a laptop. The question is, how can I make sure I will have fair access to privately owned things? How can I sustain a certain control over those assets? I haven't owned the means of production for decades, what happens when I don't even own the things that define my identity? This is both a risk and an opportunity. I am only sure that it is not a coincidence if the financial crisis was triggered by the realisation that some forms of ownership cannot be a desire any more.

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Untitled by Samia Mirza.