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Dispatches from the Montréal Biennial: Cybernetic Tarot



British artist Suzanne Treister's contribution to the biennial includes two massive (and massively intricate) marker-on-wall drawings as well as a suite of 78 tarot card drawings — all made with the purpose of detailing the history of cybernetics and how Martin Heidegger, Margaret Mead, Ada Lovelace, drones, Ken Kesey, and many other people and things are part of the history of technology. We sat down with Treister at Tuesday's press preview and asked for a bit of explanation.

What is the common thread through the tarot drawings? Progress?

Technology?

It's tracing histories of technology and different attitudes toward technology. At the center of it is the history of cybernetics. It started off with researching cybernetics and the Macy Conferences, which happened in New York between 1946 and 1953 in the aftermath of world war II. A whole group of hard and soft scientists were convened to try and develop a unified theory of the human mind in order to control humanity and to try to stop another world war and fascism from reoccurring. What happened is that I realized in investigating this that it's a forgotten moment in history but it really illuminates what's happening now with the internet in terms of cybernetics being feedback loops of control. The internet has been corporatized and governmentized and the information you put in goes around and comes back to you and it's a controlling mechanism. I wanted to trace all those histories and all the histories related to it. Like, how at the time of the Macy Conferences a lot of the people were also involved in the CIA LSD drug testing experiments, which gave birth to

the counterculture. So you've got that countercultural history which runs around it. I wanted to trace what happened to the counterculture since the 70s, how those people didn't just disappear. The counterculture manifests in different ways — some of them have become more pro-technology, techno-humanism, techno-nihilism. And then I wanted to trace the history of the primitivists and the anarcho-primitivists, people who would like to actually abolish technology; the post-Leftists; then parallel to that in one of the diagrams is a history of science fiction and writers who had dystopian or utopian descriptions of potential futures; and then the history of computers and the internet, to try to get a really big picture of where things came from and where they are going. I made this series of 78 tarot cards based on details from those five diagrams to try to make it interactive so it would be like a tool for people to work out possible futures.



Why did you choose tarot as your frame?

It's a structure whereby — I'm not using it in any divinatory way — each card has an interpretation and it's quite interesting to put two things in conjunction with each other and then work out possible scenarios. Lots of people, because these are available on the internet as a pack, who actually try playing with the cards and it's given them ideas. That's the idea — to jolt people out of normal paths of thought. If you just randomly take two things and put them together, it forces your brain to make a different structure. That was the idea, to give people the big picture because people normally don't have all of that information. They have scattered bits of information and it's not usually up to date or very deep because that information isn't always available. So I wanted to try to get all those histories together in a big picture and make a way for people to be informed and think about solutions or different scenarios for where to go from here.



Did you come up with any solutions of your own?

No. For me, for a long time I've been torn between an addiction to new technology and also resistance to them. Like I resisted things like Facebook as soon as they'd come up because I knew that they were going to be data collection sources for free government information. If you put something on Facebook, it's free. I knew that years before the Snowden thing and I was trying to tell people. That's another reason I did that project — not just to think of a way into the future, but to stop people from doing things that are going to make things worst. Everyone thought I was a conspiracy theorist, but now they know I'm not.

