

**NEW PEDESTRIANS:**  
**Connections and Rituals in the Digital Everyday**

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at the University of Missouri-Columbia

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree  
Master of Fine Arts

by  
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The undersigned, appointed by the dean of the Graduate School, have examined the thesis entitled

**NEW PEDESTRIANS:**

**Connections and Rituals in the Digital Everyday**

Presented by Danielle Langdon,

a candidate for the degree of Master of Fine Arts,

and hereby certify that, in their opinion, it is worthy of acceptance.

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To my family and my best friend, Jesse.  
*Thank you for your unconditional love and support.*

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## ABSTRACT

As we e-mail, text, and Tweet, mobile technology is redefining the boundaries between absence and presence, as well as private and public. Technology allows us to control how we present ourselves and where we put our attention. However, these devices also seem to have control over us: our bodies, our communities, and our relationships. Winston Churchill once said, we shape our buildings, which in turn shape us. The same can be said of our mobile technologies. Smart phones are changing our lives, sometimes for better, sometimes for worse, and sometimes without us realizing it. I believe we can influence the development and deployment of technology if we are mindful and aware of what the media has to offer and what the consequences may be.

This body of work examines the physical and psychological shaping that is occurring as we integrate mobile devices into our lives. In this paper, we will thoughtfully consider how mobile technology has become a poignant player in our connections and daily rituals.

My intention is not to deter people away from their devices; this work is not an attack on mobile technology. Rather, it asks the reader to reflect on his or her own habits. I am asking users to develop a more self-aware, examined relationship with their smart phones. I hope that through this examination, users will begin to ask questions about what is most sustaining in human relationships and customs.

## Introduction

I began my graduate school education at a sizeable institution, the University of Missouri, in the spring of 2011. After having been an undergraduate at a small liberal arts school, Ursinus College, and an employee at a small architectural design firm, CUH2A, the number of students, faculty and staff walking around the MU campus overwhelmed me. But more noticeable than the sheer number of bodies, was the number of heads looking downward. I had grown accustomed to head nods and smiles as I strolled around the small Ursinus campus and the quaint CUH2A building, but at MU those gestures were far less common than the swipe motion, texting thumbs and the ‘earbud daze.’ I have always been interested how people move and how society works, which is apparent by my dual degrees in dance and media communications, so I tend to observe people in their everyday lives to find my next moment of inspiration. In this way, my work relates to that of sound installation and fiber artist, Christy Matson who says,

“I create artworks and installations that balance the use of technological, immaterial data with physical tangible artifacts. I embrace the use of technology in my work, but I continue to be suspicious of its social implications. Using technology to create an environment that highlights the experience of living in an analog world and inhabiting our physical bodies feels more and more like a survival strategy than a passing fetish...I draw on both my everyday interactions with digital technology and the very, very analog experience of being alive.”<sup>1</sup>

I am also interested in today’s ordinary and habitual aspects of life, or as writer George Perec defines it – the “infra-ordinary”<sup>2</sup>. In particular, I have become keen on the “infra-ordinary” of people and their smart phones.



Smart phones are used for nearly everything today. They are used for calling, emailing, texting, navigating, listening to music, tweeting, Facebook stalking, and gaming. There is even an app called the Melon Meter that claims to detect a watermelon's ripeness by using the iPhone's microphone. Before I got my smart phone, I did not fully appreciate or understand the hype. I remember saying, "I have a laptop and a cell phone, why would I need a smart phone?" I also remember being annoyed at my friends' willingness to pull out their smart phones with the first sign of a question, or the first lull in conversation. That all changed however, when I got my first smart phone. I was overcome by its capabilities and at how quickly I adapted to having those features at my fingertips. My Samsung Galaxy S3 was fantastic and it came with me everywhere. It made almost every task easier and it saved me a great deal of time. Nonetheless, I couldn't help but wonder, is this costing me more than my monthly bill? How is this technology *really* affecting me? Do the positives outweigh the negatives? How can we have so much control and yet lose so much freedom? Is personal communication as meaningful if it is transmitted through a mass medium? I was certainly not the first person to ask these questions, and that is where this research began.

Smart phone technology is still fairly new and the norms for using them are not fully established, which offers an opportunity for thoughtful consideration about our technologies, our connections, and the relationships between them. Eventually, people will get used to the device and over time it will become ubiquitous in our routines. However, as psychology professor Kenneth Gergen describes, right now we are struggling with the "challenge of absent-presence,"<sup>3</sup> as we engage with non-present

partners despite the company of people in our physical location. We may be physically present, but our thoughts and emotions are often elsewhere. Consider the dinner party guest who is on his mobile device throughout the meal. He is simultaneously in the room physically, but clearly absent in thought. This can be problematic as the boundaries between humans and technology collapse. Where is he really? Many users believe their truest self is the one they portray digitally, so how do we know for sure where our true selves reside? And what if our in-person personae and our online portrayals contradict one another? Which one is more *real*? Does it even matter anymore? The blurring between presence and absence is just one boundary between humans and technology that is in flux; digital media is also changing the boundary between public and private. Mobile phone users, for example, conduct private conversations in very public spaces without much hesitation. At the core of these boundary fluctuations, is a deep confusion about what is virtual and what is real. Digital media has thus led us to question the very authenticity of identity, relationships, and rituals. Some critics highlight how, within these changes, the media becomes almost mundane as it gets absorbed into our everyday lives.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, we will examine how smart phone technology is being incorporated into our routine practices of relating to one another and to ourselves, and emphasis will be placed on the blurring boundaries between presence and absence.

Our analysis begins with a closer look at the psychological effects of digital technology. We will look at this concept a historical context, examine the theories of technological determinists, compare that with social constructivists, and then cover the social shaping perspective. In section two we will move on to the physical effects of new

technologies. Again we will begin with the historical context, followed by the determinist and constructivist perspectives, and conclude with ideas of embodiment and bodily awareness. In the third section, I will discuss my corresponding body of video artwork titled “New Pedestrians.” The fourth and final section will offer concluding thoughts and reflections about our connections and rituals in the digital everyday. The purpose of this paper is to provide the means for critical thought regarding our relationship with mobile technology and how it is shaping our society holistically and individually.

### ***Section 1 – Psychological Effects: New media, same questions***

There are more ways to communicate with one another today than ever before. Face-to-face conversations, ‘snail mail,’ and landlines are now joined with Internet chat rooms, social networking, gaming communities, and texting. It is no surprise that with this influx of communication technology, questions have arisen about the effects on our interactions and relationships. How is this technology helping us? How is it hurting us? And how do we want our future with technology to look? It seems almost daily I come across an article headline asking, “Is the iPhone Killing My Creativity”<sup>5</sup> or “Is Facebook Making Us Lonely?”<sup>6</sup> What is interesting is that these types of questions are not new. When faced with new technology, the task for scholars, users and critics has always been to make sense of it all. In general, people tend to lean in one of two directions: some believe that new technologies come in and threaten our societal structure, whereas others believe it is our society that effects how the technology is being developed and

implemented. Eventually, all new technology gets absorbed into society and, over time, becomes almost invisible. Before that happens with the smart phone, while it is still a fairly new device, now is the time to examine these questions and thoughtfully consider what role we want mobile technology to play in our routines and relationships.

### **Section 1a – *Technological Determinism: Machines change us***

Let us start by examining the popular reaction to new media; machines change us. “Technological determinism” is a term that was coined by American economist and sociologist, Thorstein Veblen, during the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>7</sup> Veblen, along with many other reductionist theorists of his time, believed that technology shapes how we as a society think, feel, act and operate. The issue with determinism is that it leaves humans without freewill. As theorist Charles Beard claims “technology marches in seven-league boots from one ruthless, revolutionary conquest to another, tearing down old factories and industries, flinging up new processes with terrifying rapidity.”<sup>8</sup> For example, the invention of the automobile is said to have caused food prices to decline. Grain for horses was no longer in demand and more land became available for planting edible foods, which in turn made food less expensive.<sup>9</sup> Marshal McLuhan’s, “the medium is the message,” is a famous phrase used in many determinists’ arguments still today. McLuhan believed that technologies have certain qualities that are transferred to the psyches of those who use them. In other words, a technology “enters a society from outside and impacts social life.”<sup>10</sup>

The technological determinist perspective should be examined not only in the context of current industrial trends, but also in the historical context of the reception of new technologies. These concerns and questions date back as far as Ancient Greece with the invention of the alphabet. Socrates (as quoted by Plato) believed writing was a threat to oral traditions and storytelling. He warned that writing would hinder people's memories and therefore, "they will be hearers of many things and will have learned nothing; they will appear to be omniscient and will generally know nothing."<sup>11</sup> This same resistance came again with the invention of the printing press. The development of movable type during the fifteenth century allowed the widespread printing of books during the time of the Renaissance in Europe. This new technology allowed for the mass production of printed material that was previously impossible with the agonizingly slow block printing and hand copying. However, with the success of the press came great opposition. The papal court contemplated making printing press companies acquire a license from the Catholic Church (an idea rejected in the end), and some nobles refused to have printed books in their libraries. The thinking was that to do so would discredit the valuable hand-copied manuscripts.<sup>12</sup> Society has a tendency to repeat the same ideas, no matter the era or specifics. Writer Nancy Baym explains that, "The language and forms of evidence may have changed, but the concern that communication technologies make us dumber is as old as writing."<sup>13</sup>

People often question the quality of digital interactions, believing technological mediation takes away social cues that allow deeper understanding and meaning to

conversations. [Baym, 30] There is a popular notion that mediated interactions are not as authentic, or *real*, as those that happen in person. Walter Benjamin famously argued in, *Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* that the ‘aura’ of an artwork fades when it is reproduced. “Even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be.”<sup>14</sup> And although Benjamin is often portrayed as an advocate of presence and liveness, he also recognizes that the lack of presence can be what makes a work beautiful. As Steve Dixon writes,

The photographic reproduction is incomparable not because it is less than the live moment that it captures, but because it is, in another artistic sense (the photographic sense), the *original* that is designed for reproduction. Benjamin maintains that mechanical reproduction “emancipates the work of art from its parasitical dependence on ritual... the work of art reproduced becomes the work of art designed for reproducibility.” He goes on to observe that the function of art within an age of mechanical reproduction is no longer based on ritual, but on politics.<sup>15</sup>

There have been similar discussions regarding the authenticity of a text message versus a face-to-face conversation. Many argue that texts are not as authentic for a variety of reasons including the time delay, abbreviated language and, more notably, the lack of visual and auditory social cues. But perhaps, as Benjamin concludes with regards to photography, these elements are exactly what make text messages so attractive.

To explain this argument further, there is no denying that in face-to-face conversations people are less likely to experience absent-presence and there is a complete set of information available to understand one another; they can see body language, facial expressions, eye gaze, appearance, and the sound of one another’s voice. All of these

factors together provide people the tools needed to interpret messages and make meaningful connections. New media, on the other hand, is often depicted as causing *social isolation* [Baym, 37]. As Sherry Turkle explains in her book *Alone Together*,

Technology has become the architect of our intimacies. Online, we face a moment of temptation. Drawn by the illusion of companionship without the demands of intimacy, we conduct “risk free” affairs on Second Life and confuse the scattershot postings on a Facebook wall with authentic communication. And now, we are promised “sociable robots” that will marry companionship with convenience.<sup>16</sup>

Turkle goes on to argue that people, in general, are vulnerable, and technology offers us a seductive alternative to messy human relationships. We are lonely, but afraid of intimacy. Our digital interactions allow us to hide from each other, even while we are joined together. It is, simply put, much easier to text than talk. [Turkle, 1] This perspective, in fact, tells us more about society than about the technology itself. Human beings have a strong desire to protect, trust and connect with one another. And so, it is no surprise that our reaction to the potential threat technology poses to society is to question and analyze our options. However, in referring back to Benjamin’s viewpoint, a text message is incomparable to a face-to-face conversation because, like a photograph, a text message is an “*original* that is designed for reproduction.” [Benjamin, 218] And just as Philip Auslander argues with regard to performance,

...live performance has indeed been pried from its shell and all performance modes, live or mediatized, are now equal: none is perceived as auratic or authentic; the live performance is just one more reproduction of a given text or one more reproducible text.<sup>17</sup>

All conversations, whether conducted face-to-face or through technology, should be considered valuable. The use of technology does not significantly alter our reception of a

message, since, as Steve Dixon explains, “our minds are already mediatized.” [Dixon, 118]

It is important to detail some of the new ways people are connecting with each other via smart phones. There is a tendency now to use these new devices to control the intensity of our connections. Cell phones make it easy to communicate when we want, and disengage just as quickly. As many users admit, it is much easier to text a short message than to make a real-time phone call. As Turkle explains,

A thirteen-year-old tells me she “hates the phone and never listens to voicemail.” Texting offers just the right amount of access, just the right amount of control. She is the modern Goldilocks: for her, texting puts people not too close, not too far, but at just the right distance. The world is now full of modern Goldilockses, people who take comfort in being in touch with a lot of people whom they also keep at bay. A twenty-one-year old college student reflects on the new balance: “I don’t use my phone for calls anymore. I don’t have the time to just go on and on. I like texting, Twitter, looking at someone’s Facebook wall. I learn what I need to know. [Turkle, 15]

People think being alone is a problem, so we reach for our devices to instantly connect. I, like many others, know that my “favorites” are just a tap away and a text will let someone know I’m thinking about them without the commitment of a conversation. It is easier now than ever before to keep in touch, and due to this ease we tend to contact our loved ones more often. Reading through my old text messages and saved emails brings a smile to my face, but this pleasure also brings new compulsions that I am still learning to manage. I check my email first thing in the morning and right before bed at night. Learning of professional updates, problems or ideas at these times has not proven helpful; many times it instead causes more anxiety at times when I should be enjoying some solitude and time with my own thoughts.



We want control over where we put our attention and smart phones make it easy to do just that. However, with this need to control comes a new set of anxieties. Users have become genuinely terrified of losing the possibility to connect, of being cut off. I have a friend who claimed, “I would die without my iPhone.” Without our devices, we feel disconnected. Matt Richtel, American writer for The New York Times, was awarded the 2010 Pulitzer Prize for National Reporting for a series on distracted driving. In his piece, “In Study, Texting Lifts Crash Risk by Large Margin,” he explains how we even insist on texting while driving and object to rules that would regulate the practice, even though we are well aware of the risks involved.<sup>18</sup> Not only do we want control over where we put our attention, we also want control over how we present ourselves. In many cases, we present the person we *want* to be, the perfect version of ourselves. A text message allows us to perfectly craft what we want to say and eliminates the need to respond in real time. Emanuel Schegloff, a professor at the UCLA and one of the first people to study telephone-mediated interaction, suggests “mobile media don’t create perpetual contact so much as offer the perpetual possibility of making contact, a distinction some exploit by strategically limiting their availability.” [Baym, 11] Mobile devices have also enabled people to “microcoordinate”<sup>19</sup> their actions. For example, calling a spouse to let them know you are going to pick up milk on the way home from work or texting to ask what time you should meet up at the movie theater. The continuous accessibility mobile phones allow for, keeps people tightly connected but can also cause an overwhelming feeling of obligation. I am sure we have all had a loved one ask, “Why didn’t you call to let me know you were going to be late?” There is a new and continuous

accountability in our relationships. So when is it acceptable to turn off our technology without facing social repercussions?

A smart phone is much more than ‘just’ a phone: it is the world in the palm of your hand. The most isolated location can now be the center of connection, learning and economic activity. This is “the experience of living full-time on the Net, newly free in some ways, newly yoked in others. We are all cyborgs now” [Turkle, 152]. Are we really becoming cyborgs? Donna Haraway famously declared that by the late 20<sup>th</sup> century we would all become hybrids of machine and organism, we would become ‘cyborgs’.<sup>20</sup> Are smart phones changing us in a more substantial way than previous technological devices? In a New York Times article titled, “Are We Becoming Cyborgs,” Oxford professor Susan Greenfield claims,

...technologies up until now have been a means to an end. The printing press enabled you to read both fiction and fact that gave you insight into the real world. A fridge enabled you to keep your food fresh longer. A car or plane enabled you to travel farther and faster. What concerns me is that the current technologies have been converted from being a means to being ends. Instead of complimenting or supplementing or enriching life in three dimensions, an alternative life in just two dimensions – stimulating only hearing and vision – seems to have become an end in and of itself.<sup>21</sup>

The idea of a cyborg is essentially an enhanced human. The fear here is that rather than just enhancing human cognition, technology is replacing human thought and connection. Knowledge is an understanding of how different information fits together and there is an element of interpretation in learning, which is needed for advancement. While we can automate the gathering of knowledge (i.e. the internet), we cannot (or perhaps I should say that we ‘should not’) automate the understanding of that information. That is how

human beings are innately different from machines. An algorithm cannot tell me whether a painting is beautiful – only human beings can think abstractly in this way. We must be careful not to confuse the power of information with human understanding. As Maria Popova, an M.I.T. Futures of Entertainment Fellow and writer for *Wired* and *The Atlantic* explains,

This conflation of information and insight is something I constantly worry about. Algorithms can help access information, but the insight we extract from it is really the fabric of our individual, lived human experience. This can never be replaced or automated. [NY Times, Cyborg article]

We should not fear human beings *becoming* cyborgs – we have always been cyborgs really. Anyone who has ever used a tool or wears glasses could be considered a cyborg. We should, instead, fear abandoning our ability to think critically in lieu of easy access to information.

Turkle also argues that our need to be constantly connected is threatening our capacity for self-reflection. “What technology makes easy is not always what nurtures the human spirit.”<sup>22</sup> Solitude is where people find themselves and experience their own thoughts, and only after finding ourselves can we reach out and relate to others. As Thomas Moore, author of *Care of the Soul*, says, “We seem to have a complex about busyness in our culture. Most of us do have time in our days that we could devote to simple relaxation, but we convince ourselves that we don’t.”<sup>23</sup> It seems there is always something that needs to get done or needs our attention. “Unfortunately,” Moore says, “we don’t get a lot of support in this culture for doing nothing. If we aren’t accomplishing something, we feel that we’re wasting time.” [Moore] And many times, when we are not

busy, we reach for our smart phones to check our email, send a text, or post on Facebook. If we are constantly focused on external stimulation, we leave ourselves little time for inner growth and renewal. Pulitzer prize-winning writer John Updike, attributes his astonishing productivity to a schedule that honors empty time. “Ideally, much of my day should be, in a strict sense, idle, for it is often in idle moments that real inspiration comes.” For me, creating ‘sacred spaces’ [Turkle] where my cell phone is absent has helped in my search for solitude. For example, I no longer bring my cell phone to the dinner table. It may not seem like much, but it has allowed for more genuine conversations and critical thinking during that hour. When you read a book there is time for reflection; you can read a few pages, then stare at the wall while thinking about what you just read. Now, people are instantly Tweeting as soon as they have some kind of experience. And as Greenfield explains,

They’re tweeting for fear that they may lose their identity if they don’t make some kind of instant response. This is a concern for me, apart from the obvious want of regulation and slander and unsubstantiated lies that people spread around, that people no longer have the time for reflection. [NY Times, Cyborgs]

Though there are many applications and tools now that allow users to save content and engage with it later, which does allow time for reflection, it really comes down to how people are choosing to engage with these technologies. Florie Brizel has spent the past six years immersed in learning and writing about the mobile phone industry, and as she explains,

Mobile phones allow people to talk to the world, but they can do so much more. We must teach people how to really maximize the global linkage available to them through their mobile devices, especially if we expect them to be used for any kind of social good. Of course, technology and humanity are not necessarily compatible. One is about an anonymous push forward into the unknown... to explore it, to develop and exploit it, which is important. The other is about paying

undivided attention to the individual and the world in front of you, developing relationships, and increasing consciousness. Both are necessary. The challenge is figuring out how to use technology to enhance humanity, not degrade it.<sup>24</sup>

It is crucial that, while smart phones are still in their infancy, we focus on the ways this technology can help humanity. How can they direct our attention to our own bodies, communities, politics, and planet? By leading examined lives with technology, I believe we can answer these questions.

Korean American artist Nam June Paik created groundbreaking artworks that criticized the public's willingness to give their bodies and minds over to the television. Paik synthesized art and technology in an effort to exorcise the demons of mass-consumer, technology-obsessed society. "Television has been attacking us all our lives," he says, "now we can attack it back."<sup>25</sup> However, Paik was also optimistic in his theory. When describing his sculptural work titled "Family of Robot," which consists of figures fashioned from old television sets, he claimed that,

Our life is half natural and half technological. Half-and-half is good. You cannot deny that high-tech is progress. We need it for jobs. Yet if you make only high-tech, you make war. So we must have a strong human element to keep modesty and natural life.<sup>26</sup>

According to Lynne Markus, technological determinism is ultimately a hopeful theory.<sup>27</sup> If technology causes negative effects, then they can be eliminated with the development of better technology. Disappointingly though, this places people in a powerless position to stop changes from happening unless we invent new, better devices. Here is where Paik's perspective differs from that of many technological determinists. His assessment conversely, empowers individuals by calling for, as quoted earlier, "a strong human

element.” The bloody head of an ox was hung over the door to Paik’s first video exhibit in Wuppertal, Germany, in 1963, as a shock device “to get the audience into a oneness of consciousness so they could perceive more.”<sup>28</sup> Instead of mindlessly consuming whatever is on the television, Paik believed that by being aware and conscious in our consumption we would remain in control of the technology. Our goal in using technology cannot be to overlook engagement in living; it should encourage both physical and intellectual engagement and awareness.

### **Section 1b – *Social Construction of Technology: We change machines***

In what I have outlined thus far, the idea has been that technology causes society to change. There are other perspectives that share similar concerns, but do not give technology as much supremacy. Wiebe Bijker and Trevor Pinch were the leading theorists of the “Social Construction of Technology,” or SCOT, standpoint that concentrates on how technologies arise from social practices. SCOT considers “human beings, not machines, the agents of change, as men and women introduce new systems of machines that alter their life world.”<sup>29</sup> Social constructivists also argue that technology cannot be fully understood without analyzing how it becomes embedded and used in society. Pinch and Bijker argue that there are four basic concepts to the SCOT theory: 1) Interpretative flexibility, which means that technologies have different meanings to different groups of people; 2) These relevant social groups can be identified based on their common or conflicting understandings of the technology in question; 3) There is a

level of design flexibility in technology, meaning that it can be constructed in many different ways; 4) Problems and conflicts are likely to arise seeing as different groups of people in different societies have varying problems, which lead to diverse designs and usages.<sup>30</sup> So as you can see, SCOT theorists believe that human beings are the agents of change and technological development is a result of our societal actions and interpretations.

The choices made by developers, engineers and designers are based on current trends in their social context. However, once the technology has been constructed there are a number of factors that will determine how users take up and use the media. Competition between rival corporations is one factor that may drive development in different directions. For example, after Twitter was established, Facebook made adjustments to capitalize on Twitter's success. Facebook did not want Twitter to become the best way for large corporations and public figures to connect with users, so one of the most significant changes Facebook made was to drop the 5,000-friend limit from the public pages. There were a number of other updates including, real-time news feed updates, the ability to sort and filter your feed more easily, and the new status update box asks, "What's on your mind?" instead of the old "What are you doing right now?"<sup>31</sup> These updates show that Facebook considers Twitter a threat and by making significant changes in response, Facebook is also showing its users how quickly it is capable of adapting to current trends.

Janet Fulk, a professor of communication in the USC Annenberg School for Communication, highlights the influence an individual's peers have on their perception and use of the media. She studied email specifically and found that the opinions of peers were strong authorities on whether an individual had a positive or negative attitude toward email.<sup>32</sup> Cambell and Russo did a similar study regarding mobile technology in the Midwestern United States and found that,

Attitudes towards behaviors such as whether or not one should turn off the mobile in a restaurant were shaped by the attitudes of peers. As people discuss new media, and as those media are represented in other media such as television, print, and film, devices themselves come to carry social meaning (so that some phones look cool, and others look dorky). [Baym, 41]

I have experienced this in my own increasing awareness of cell phone habits. Group situations often turn into an individual game of cell phone checking. If at some point during the gathering one person takes their phone out to post something on Facebook or send a text, the pressure has been lifted from the entire group allowing anyone to pull out their phone, and many do just that. I have also witnessed the opposite happening. My college friends and I got together after having not seen each other in a significant amount of time, and at one point there was a lull in conversation at which time my friend, we'll call her Carol for the purposes of this story, promptly took out her phone to check her email. One of my other friends clearly found it inappropriate, thereby pointing out the awkward moment by making a joke: "I see someone is important these days." The comment shamed Carol and prevented the rest of us from checking our own devices throughout the rest of the gathering. These situations do not necessarily mean we are becoming unsociable or inconsiderate; they simply highlight the increasingly complex nature of human interactions in the face of smart phones. Often, smart phones in groups



are also used as conversation generators. Icebreakers such as, “Have you seen this new video on YouTube?” or “Look at this photo my Mom sent me yesterday, it’s hilarious” are new and fairly easy ways to find commonality with a peer. The cell phone, with the increasing number of features and capabilities, has become a resourceful object when searching for ways to spark and fuel a conversation. If abused however, it can also interrupt conversations and create awkward pauses if/when one party insists on updating their Facebook status before answering a question posed by another party. As with any form of communication, there are many different ways to connect to one another. Now is the time to decide what role we want the smart phone to play in those connections. When is it appropriate, and when is it not?

There is some allure in reading an old letter sent from one family member to another – a former president to his first lady – a singer to his/her number one fan. We generally save these artifacts to share with future generations. Do we save emails and text messages this way? I had a professor once who claimed that, “We are loosing today’s history for tomorrow’s generation because everything is digital.” This is a question I have revisited often during my research. There is a setting on my phone “delete old messages when maximum number of messages is reached” that I have not selected. I want to keep certain messages without my phone automatically deleting them. In fear that they will somehow still get deleted, I decided to start a journal; a digital ‘journal’ of Word documents in a file on my hard drive. I am, as Steve Dixon writes, “refashioning an older media,” (in this case writing) and the “older media is refashioning itself to answer the challenges of new media.” [Dixon, 136] Typing, rather than handwriting, my journal is

not to say I am no longer ‘writing.’ I am adapting how I write for the times in which I am writing. And as Derrida argues, “writing is always a technology and already electronic.” [Dixon, 138] In an article on Today, Jacoba Urist details the current debate among experts, parents and teachers about the cursive writing curriculum in schools. She explains that, “...some are arguing that, in a digital age, mandatory cursive instruction is a step backwards while others believe it’s a long-held cultural tradition worth preserving.”<sup>33</sup> I see value in both continuing the cursive tradition and introducing students to the keyboard early on in their education. There is no need to have one replace the other. Similar to learning both roman and cursive lettering, now is the time to introduce typing as another form of writing – no better or worse than handwriting, simply an alternative.

As we saw in the technological determinist section, new technologies often awaken fears of moral decline. Often, these fears are what influence policy decisions at the personal, family, or corporate level. As Baym writes, “communication about the technologies becomes more important than the technologies in shaping the uses and effects of new media.” [Baym, 41] A large portion of the communication regarding new technologies gets directed toward children and teenagers. Parents tend to have an innate fear losing control over their kids, which is a dilemma present in child rearing regardless of technology. However, this anxiety is easily displaced onto the seemingly more manageable technology.<sup>34</sup> For example, the new phenomenon among young people called “sexting,” is largely blamed on cell phone technology rather than on the adolescent.

“Sexting” is when naked photographs or sexually explicit messages are shared via cell phone.

I see two responses taking place as a result of “sexting.” The first is derived from the anxiety regarding children’s sexuality and their empowerment. There are an ever-increasing number of surveillance systems parents can implement on their child’s devices that include everything from blocked web searches to GPS tracking systems. “My Mobile Watchdog” is marketed as “the best child monitoring software for mobile phones!” The software includes monitoring capabilities to know who is texting your child, a daily summary of phone activity that is sent to your email, and location tracking that stores up to 99 locations.<sup>35</sup> Parents are now easily able to monitor any and all cell phone activity with the purchase of some software or an application download. The second reaction to “sexting” has landed on the complete opposite end of the spectrum with applications like “Wink,” “Tigertext” and “Snapchat.” In an article by Nick Bilton titled “Disruptions: Indecret Photos, Glimpsed Then Gone”, the new application “Snapchat” is explained as being perfect for sending sexually explicit photos since they are deleted after a mere 10 seconds.

According to a study by the Pew Research Center’s Internet and American Life Project that is due out later this year, 6 percent of adult Americans admit to having sent a “sexually suggestive nude or nearly nude photo or video” using a cellphone. Another 15 percent have received such material. Three percent of teenagers admit to sending sexually explicit content. All of this sexting, as the practice is known, creates an opening for technology that might make the photos less likely to end up in wide circulation.<sup>36</sup>

So as we can see, society has reacted in multiple ways to the new phenomenon in texting. This in fact tells us very little about the technology itself. It does however, provide

insight into how technologies come to be and how they are understood and used by society, which is not always how they were originally intended.

SCOT argues that technologies do not enter the scene fully developed and ready to be implemented, nor are their uses predetermined. As theorists Croteau & Hoyness explain,

Technological development is the result of several interacting variables: the capabilities of new machines, the priorities of owners and investors, the cultural practices and traditions that the new technologies confront, the uses of potentially competing machines, and the specific ways people actually talk about and use the new technologies.<sup>37</sup>

This is true of older technologies as well we new media. Radios were originally thought to be useful for one-to-one communication, like a wireless telephone. Similarly, the early developers of the telephone envisioned the technology to be capable of delivering the news into the home. The Internet was also a technology whose unexpected implementation became its most common use. It was originally conceived as a military back-up system, but by the 1980s it had been transformed by its users.<sup>38</sup> Broadly speaking, new interactive technology provides users with the ability to do more than just receive information. They can respond to messages, choose images they want to see, and browse through information selecting only what is interesting. This two-way street allows for more user influence in shaping how new media gets developed and adopted.

Russell Neuman uses the metaphor of a tug-of-war to describe the relationship between the technological drivers and the psychological/economic forces that influence new media. The technological drivers include: the collapse of geographical barriers,

increased speed of communication, increased volume of communication, more channels of information, more opportunities for interaction, and more user control. [Croteau & Hoynes, 322] These forces encourage diversity of information and user participation, while social/economic forces pull more toward standardization. As Amy Harmon writes in New York Times article, “Exploration of World Wide Web Tilts from Eclectic to Mundane,”

Most of us have deeply ingrained media habits that are not likely to change dramatically simply because of new technological capabilities. As the Web matures and major media companies both develop more online content and focus their marketing strategies on the online audience, people are spending more time online but are visiting fewer Websites.<sup>39</sup>

The growth of the Internet does not mean users will radically change their media habits. Though websites are now much easier and cheaper to create than a magazine or newspaper, companies are still finding it challenging to establish and maintain an audience. Large corporations like CNN and Sears, can easily translate their brand onto the Internet. Whereas less established companies often only reach a smaller, more select audience who generally become familiar with the brand from their offline activities. There are many websites online today that go completely unvisited. The same branding struggles still exist with new technologies as they did with traditional media. [Croteau & Hoynes, 328]

Neuman concludes his argument by saying, “the anticipated impacts of the new media are neither inevitable nor self-evident.” [Croteau & Hoynes, 331] In other words, it is important to analyze many avenues, like media habits and market trends, when discussing the effects of new technologies. From the viewpoint of SCOT, technologies do

not stand-alone and transform society. Instead, human agency and social context are the driving factors for technological change. SCOT sees technology as a resource that people are free to use or ignore as they wish. As postmodern literary critic, Katherine Hayle claims, “people become posthuman when they think they are posthuman.” [Dixon, 303] This social constructivist viewpoint allows for human beings, and not machines, to shape the uses and consequences of technologies. But as we’ve seen, these adaptations are not always as originally intended.

### **Section 1c – *Conclusion: Social Shaping and Finding a Balance***

The analysis of technology and its effects has largely been dichotomized between the determinists and constructivists. This binary way of thinking has haunted Western philosophy for centuries: male versus female, liberal versus conservative, live versus mediatized. I believe, with regard to new technology, that we should focus our attention somewhere between the determinists and the constructivists. Theorists Robin Williams and David Edge refer to this middle ground as the “Social Shaping of Technology,” which argues that technological advancements develop from “a mix of affordances – the social capabilities technological qualities enable – and the unexpected and emergent ways that people make use of those affordances.” [Baym, 44] It is important to consider people, technologies and institutions as being interrelated social influences when analyzing the forms and uses of technology. It is a concoction of these societal

circumstances that will determine why certain technologies are developed, what they have to offer, and how they are used in everyday life.

New technology will not always be new, and so these utopian and dystopian conversations will inevitably end when the technology is sufficiently *domesticated*. According to Dr. Leslie Haddon, author of “The Information Society,” British and Norwegian media and technology studies in the 1990s developed the *domestication* approach to technology. This idea concurs with social shaping in seeing the relationship between technology and society as one of mutual shaping, but is specifically interested in how technology moves from being foreign to common.<sup>40</sup> Apple iPods, for example, are not scrutinized as much as they were when they first came on the market. Over time and through daily use, most technologies become almost invisible in our everyday lives. People project their own personal meanings and significance onto new technology based on previous experiences, design, social norms, etc. “The process of domestication plays out at societal levels, but also in daily interactions as people figure out where to place devices, and, more importantly who gets to use them for what and who doesn’t” [Baym, 44].

Social media is one example of a new mediated communication technology that is becoming domesticated. When MySpace and Facebook first became popular, businesses were leery of using them as marketing tools in fear the sites would disrupt productivity and violate privacy. Now, according to a Harvard Business Review, 79% of US companies are using or are planning to use social media.<sup>41</sup> Also, according to Forrester

Research, 75% of Internet surfers used social media in the second quarter of 2008, which is a significant rise from 56% in 2007.<sup>42</sup> Judging by these statistics, social media is on its way to becoming invisible and ubiquitous. However, even though social media is becoming a more ordinary part of everyday conversations, the anxieties surrounding it have not been resolved. The concerns people express when discussing technology are concerns we would have even if the technology did not exist. These questions pertain more to what it means to be human, to have meaningful relationships, and what it means to be yourself. Rather than being deterministic, social shaping theorists “see the consequences of technology on social life as *emergent*” [Baym, 48]. The direction of influence between people and technology is two-way.

As we examined in our technological determinist section, new communication technology often engenders fears that interactions will become watered down and inadequate. In our social constructivist analysis, we saw that SCOT theorists believe people are the key drivers in determining how new communication technologies are implemented. In social shaping, however, it is believed that both of these viewpoints are valid and both contribute to how communication is changing in digital spaces. As Baym explains,

...people inject sociability into mediated communication, showing emotion, expressing closeness and availability, having fun, and building new social structures. I’ll argue that mediated interaction should be seen as a new and eclectic mixed modality that combines elements of face-to-face communication with elements of writing, rather than as a diminished form of embodied interaction. [Baym, 51]



In other words, mediated communication is neither dystopian nor utopian. Rather, the Internet and mobile smart phones provide new, complex, sometimes predictable, and sometimes surprising ways for people to communicate.

Digital communication research, which began in the 1970s as organizations were beginning to incorporate digital conferencing, has shown that people tend to rank media according to which one provides the widest range of social cues. Most people perceived the face-to-face interactions as providing more intimacy than in videoconferences, and audio meetings were seen as the least personal and least effective for getting to know someone.<sup>43</sup> Researchers have also predicted that with a lack of social cues in mediated communication, people would be more rude and mean to one another.<sup>44</sup> Though this may be true, it must also be stated that some people build very loving relationships, establish supportive communities, and communicate more often with one another with the help of technology [Baym, 55]. Mediated communication may be better than face-to-face interactions for some tasks, but not for others. Again we return to the question, when is it appropriate and when is it not?

Users have developed a lot of techniques to maintain emotional and personal connection while communicating with digital devices. The most obvious representation of this is *emoticons*, which show feeling and playfulness via symbols like a smiley face ☺. Once users started using colons, letters and parenthesis to represent faces, developers designed the actual smiley symbols and built them into new media. There are a number of other ways users show emotion via text. Acronyms have become popular such as, LOL or

ROTFL to represent laughter, all caps represents emphasis as in “I am SOOOO busy today,” and shortened words or phrases like “tho” and “gotta go” to represent immediacy. People appropriate the text to convey emotion, build an identity and build relationships. And as Baym states, “We draw from our existing repertoire of communication skills in other modes to make a medium do what we want it to do as best we can” [Baym, 63]. As for communication technology, we have combined written, oral and visual language to develop symbols and features that are unique to this media. From this, we have also started to establish when it is appropriate to use these features and when it is not. In a work email for example, it may not be appropriate to use all caps, which would give the illusion of yelling. Jerry Yang, CEO of Yahoo, made a similar mistake when he wrote an email using only lower-case letters to announce that the company was laying off 10% of its employees. While some understood it as representation of immediacy, others saw it as inappropriate. Deal Journal, the Wall Street Journal global blog at the time, criticized the CEO’s “easy-breezy” email in an article titled, “Jerry Yang, Meet the Shift Key”.<sup>45</sup> There is still some disagreement about when features of text communication are appropriate and for which situations, but it is important to note that it is not always bad. It can be quite valuable in certain circumstances and the conversation about appropriateness is an important one to continue.

As we have seen throughout this section, there is value in the middle ground. In our analysis of new media, we should focus our attention between the determinists and the constructivists and understand that technological advancements develop from a mix of factors. New media communication is not an inauthentic version of real interactions.

“What happens through mediation is interwoven, not juxtaposed, with everything else” [Baym, 98]. There is also value in balancing different modes of communication in our lives to help establish and maintain relationships. Sherry Turkle would agree that there is a time and place for technological mediation versus in-person conversation. In an interview on NPR’s *Fresh Air*, Turkle explains that technology is wonderful for quick, keep in touch moments, but not as effective for deep conversations. She goes on to explain the importance of, what she calls our “relational diet,” which should include a little bit of everything from text messages to intimate face-to-face conversations. Turkle warns that if we let text messages take over all of our communication we will begin to expect more from our technology and less from each other. With new technologies, in particular the smart phone, we never have to be alone. However, it is in times of solitude that we find ourselves, reflect, and then learn how to communicate with others. Turkle explains,

It used to be that people had a way of dealing with the world that was basically, 'I have a feeling, I want to make a call.' Now I would capture a way of dealing with the world, which is: 'I want to have a feeling, I need to send a text.' That is, with this immediate ability to connect and almost pressure to ... because you're holding your phone, you're constantly with your phone, it's almost like you don't know your thoughts and feelings until you connect.<sup>46</sup>

It is in times of solitude that we can be proactive with our thoughts, rather than reactive, which is so often the case with emails and texts. Anthony Storr writes about the importance of feeling peace in your own company.<sup>47</sup> But many people today have a hard time finding solitude even if they turn their phone off or leave it at home. Even a small amount of stillness tends to make people uncomfortable and anxious. And more importantly as Turkle explains, “Finding a balance will be more than a matter of ‘slowing

down.’ How can we make room for reflection?” [Turkle, 289]. There is a growing need for people to develop a more self-aware, examined relationship with technology. A need to establish what Turkle calls, “sacred spaces,” where technology is not controlling but helping in our relationships. Each person will need to do their own examination and find their own balance, but in that search it is important to consider all the complexities and nuances of new technology and communication today.

## **Section 2 – *Physical Effects: New media, new gestures***

I believe that in examining the ideas of digital technology, it is important to include the body and its role in our discussions. There is a common conception that digital technology is not very engaging from a physical standpoint. According to physiologist Marc Hamilton, Ph.D., “The longer you sit either in front of a computer or TV, the greater likelihood you’ll die earlier – even if you lift weights, jog or swim for 30 minutes a day.”<sup>48</sup> According to an American Cancer Society study, women who remained glued to their chairs more than six hours a day were 37% more likely to die during the time period studied than those who sat fewer than three hours per day.<sup>49</sup> The idea here is that people sit or stare mindlessly at their devices without any physical awareness. But is this perception really true? Are new technologies to blame for our lack of bodily awareness? Just as in the previous section, people tend to lean in one of two directions: some believe that new technologies threaten healthy functioning of the body, whereas others believe technological development is adopted by bodies. Again, over time this new

technology will get absorbed into society and become invisible in the way we use them. The following examination will look deeper into these questions and thoughtfully consider what role we want mobile technology to play in our physical lives and daily rituals.

### **Section 2a – *Technological Determinism: Machines affect the body***

There is no denying that people are experiencing a new kind of bodily, or kinesthetic involvement due to our relationship with devices. As we have already discussed, technology has changed the way we interact with the world, with one another, and with ourselves. Just as with the technological determinists, there are many who believe technology is harming our physical being in very tangible ways. We are generally unaware of our bodies while interacting with electronic devices, yet things are still happening TO our bodies: our vision is being affected, our posture is liable to change as we sit for longer periods, and certain muscles may become neglected altogether.

According to the 2011 annual “American Eye-Q” survey completed by the American Optometric Association (AOA),

More than half of all respondents report experiencing eyestrain or vision problems as a result of using technology. Gen Y-ers report seeing the greatest impact, with more than two-thirds (68%) reporting technology-related eye or vision problems.<sup>50</sup>

The AOA refers to this as “Computer Vision Syndrome” (CVS), which causes problems like dry eye, eyestrain, neck pain, backaches, light sensitivity and fatigue. Handheld

devices force users to position the device “closer than eyes want,” says Jim Sheedy, Ph.D., director of Vision Performance Institute at Pacific University in Forest Grove, Ore. “You have to exert more muscular effort to see at that distance and experience more symptoms than other technologies.”<sup>51</sup>

I recently visited an eye doctor having experienced some of the previously mentioned symptoms. More recently, as I am nearing the end of my graduate studies, I spend a significant number of hours every day entranced by one screen or another. I began to experience extreme eye fatigue by the end of every day, which would often result in a headache. Knowing that my livelihood as an artist relies heavily on my eyesight, I frantically reported my symptoms to the eye doctor. After conducting the normal round of procedures and tests, she explained that my eyesight was still 20/20. The symptoms I was having were, as she simply stated, “behavioral.” To help alleviate my symptoms, just as the AOA recommends, my eye doctor told me to practice the 20-20-20 rule – every 20 minutes, take a 20 second break and look at something 20 feet away. According to the AOA survey, “Gen Y is the worst about taking visual breaks. The majority of Gen Y respondents take a visual break every few hours, instead of every 20 minutes as recommended.” [AOA, 2011] If used thoughtlessly, technology can effect healthy functioning of the body; but that can be said of any number of things. If you spend a great deal of hours reading books or starring at the sun, your eyesight is also liable to be affected. So what is the reason for all the hype around technology’s effects specifically? As we realized earlier, our natural reaction to the potential threat technology

poses to the body is to question and analyze, but this is not to say that technology is the lone perpetrator in detrimental body habits.

Broadcast television and video games, for example, have long been associated with laziness and increased obesity rates in the United States. In a 1985 National Health Examination Survey, researchers found that in 12 to 17-year-old adolescents, the prevalence of obesity increased by 2% for each additional hour of television viewed.<sup>52</sup> An info graphic done by the Huffington Post shows that 61% of obese boys and 63% of obese girls reported watching television for two or more hours each day.<sup>53</sup> The info graphic also shows that 84% of 18-24 year-olds admitted to having back pain from being slumped over their phones, known as “iPosture.” The idea here is that if you use technology for long periods of time, you are bound to damage your body unknowingly. In her 2005 Occupational Medicine article, Valerie Woods of the Robens Centre for Health Ergonomics found that 81% of computer workers have “musculoskeletal pain and visual discomfort.”<sup>54</sup> Following the development of laptops in the early 1970s, there has since been increased concern over the prevalence of back/shoulder/neck pain as it relates to computer use. While evidence that computer use causes musculoskeletal disorders is inconclusive, there is evidence that the amount of time spent sitting in a certain posture will increase the likelihood of experiencing back and neck pain [Marcus et al., 2002].

Understandably, the more you sit and watch television or work at your computer, the less vigorous activity you are getting in your daily routine. Again however, this can be said of any number of sedentary activities, like sitting and reading a book or working

at a sewing machine. And more importantly, as Dr. Larry Rosen (author of *Rewired: Understanding the iGeneration* and *The Way They Learn*) says, the Internet and social media sites in particular, can also help teens uncover their true identity. A recent study also found that toddlers picked up concepts and words faster when learning on interactive screens. While experts on both sides have strong evidence to support their opinions, most seem to agree that media is best in moderation. Managing our lives with media requires a heightened sense of awareness both mentally and physically. The human body's natural position is upright with a little bit of an "S" curve in the spine. A person sitting at a computer or looking down at their phone is likely to have rounded shoulders and a forward head posture. This understandably puts strain on muscles and joints, causing soreness and fatigue. If you assume this hunched posture each time you interact with your device, it becomes habitual and much harder to correct. At times when we are mentally focused on our screens, it takes active awareness to simultaneously consider and listen to our bodies.

F.M. Alexander was an Australian actor who almost lost his voice by the end of every performance. When his doctors could not provide Alexander any relief, he discovered his own solution by looking toward his physical habits. He observed himself in a mirror while reciting his lines to see whether he could notice anything unusual, which is when he discovered his tendency to pull his head down and back. He was putting excess tension on his neck, which was affecting his lungs and vocal chords. From this discovery, he began to find ways of freeing his neck, allowing his back to lengthen, his head to go forward, and overall ways to move with greater ease.



Alexander gradually realized that the functioning of the voice depended on the correct balance of tension in his entire neuromuscular system, from head to toe. Alexander developed his technique to encourage and maintain this balance through conscious attention and control: a technique that has become applicable to a wide range of problems and aims. In short, this balance was extremely important for overall coordination and many other functions, such as breathing, posture, freedom of the joints in moving the whole body, using the arms and hands for skilled activities, staying calm under pressure, and maintaining good overall health.<sup>55</sup>

In 1894 Alexander began teaching his techniques to other actors, dancers, doctors and everyday people experiencing chronic body pain. Interestingly, Alexander was not physically *doing* anything to improve his health; he was being natural with his thoughts and finding the natural way of being in his body. American philosopher, John Dewey, was one of Alexander's most noted advocates. In the book "Freedom to Change - The Development and Science of the Alexander Technique," Frank Pierce Jones describes an interview he had with Dewey in 1947 regarding Alexander:

(Dewey) said that he had been taken by (the Alexander Technique) first because it provided a demonstration of the unity of mind and body. He thought that the demonstration had struck him more forcibly than it might have struck someone who got the sensory experience easily and quickly, because he was such a slow learner. He had always been physically awkward, he said, and performed all actions too quickly and impulsively and without thought. 'Thought' in his case was saved for 'mental' activity, which had always been easy for him. It was a revelation to discover that thought could be applied with equal advantage to everyday movements. The greatest benefit he got from lessons, Dewey said, was the ability to stop and think before acting.<sup>56</sup>

What feels 'right' in the body is generally 'wrong' because it is commonly conditioned by habits and societal norms. Often, the 'right' body position is disorienting. In Western society, people assume a collapsed posture because we are told to "relax" or "chill out." We slouch at our computer desks and inevitably experience body aches and pains. However, when we become aware of our bodies as we work, we give ourselves the

choice to assume a more natural posture. If we realize our habits with digital media and pay attention to our bodies, similar to how Alexander became mindful of his behavior, we can physically engage with technology in a way that will not harm the body.

Steve Paxton is a dancer and choreographer whose focus is also on bringing movement to the forefront of our consciousness. I studied dance improvisation and *The Thinking Body* (as it was referred to as) under Chris Aiken, an early student of Paxton's. In my classes with Aiken we were taught to consider our bodies during everyday activities; for example we were told to consider our arms while driving. Aiken would ask us questions like: are your arms hanging on the steering wheel or are you lifting them from your back, and do you jolt and tense up when you hear your phone ringing? He advised us how to more naturally go about our daily lives and be aware of certain habits. These were practices he encouraged based on Paxton's lessons in the late 1980s. The idea was to bring our everyday movements into the forefront of our minds in order to ensure healthy functioning of the body. Through his teachings Paxton "aims to bring consciousness to the dark side of the body, that is the 'other' side, or the inside, those sides not much self-seen, and to submit sensations from them to the mind for consideration."<sup>57</sup> With smart phones and the new challenges of absent presence, our bodies can be in one environment, while our thoughts and feelings can be elsewhere, positioning the body against the mind in a dualism that philosophers have been pondering for centuries. If we can bring our awareness back to our bodies while using our devices, perhaps they can truly help us more than control us.

As Maaïke Bleeker explains, “the body gets marked as something we *have* instead of something we *are*.” [Dixon, 223] When really, to be human is to have a body, and so we should not just be *with* the body, but be actually *embodied*. In the 1994 article *Spacemaking: Experience of a Virtual Body*, leading dance and technology artist Susan Kozel reflects about her experience performing in Paul Sermon’s *Telematic Dreaming*. Kozel ties ideas of embodiment to her experience with the virtual body and telepresence. The four-week performance lasted for several hours each day as Kozel acted as both a corporeal body (on her own bed) and a virtual one (her image projected onto a gallery visitor’s bed) while interacting with others’ telematic presence. Video cameras, monitors and projectors link the two locations together via videoconferencing technology. [Dixon, 216] At times during the four weeks, Kozel experiences some acts of violence while performing the work, and although she was experiencing them through telematics, she still felt betrayed and emotionally hurt. Kozel theorizes that, “the virtual body is an alternative, yet still material body, inescapably connected to its corporeal embodiment.” [Dixon, 218] She also draws on McLuhan’s argument that the electronic body is an extension of the human body, which, unlike telematics, has physical limits. The technology offers an extension to what the body can do, but we need to remember that the body can offer something to technology as well. This idea is similar to what Troika Ranch explains about their piece, *In Place* – “the human performer, bound by time and gravity and her virtual doppelganger, limited by its inability to enter the corporeal world.” [Dixon, 237]

Let us return to our earlier discussion pertaining to cyborgs. Similarly, there is a fear amongst cyborg critics and postmodernists that people will be taken over by technology. That we will get so accustomed to using our devices that we will literally become a device ourselves [Dixon, 153]. Smart phones are so commonly seen in a person's hand, they have become almost invisible. So can we consider the phone a part of our body? Are a person's glasses a part of their body? Is a prosthetic leg? In a sense, I believe they are. However, I do not believe these technologies are taking over our bodies as many determinists fear. Artist Brian Frisk created a series of animations titled *We Are Robots*, in which a number of different robots represent different human stereotypes and emotions: Sad Robot, Angrybot, Gothbot, Geekbot, etc. The machines struggle with their emotions in bleakly comic short stories that glimpse into their everyday lives. Sad Robot works at a Real Estate agency where he thinks his coworkers are "so stupid." Geekbot has a hamster named Chewbacca and struggles to connect socially with anyone. Whereas Gothbot summons demons in her room and hates how her human mother tries to connect with her using "presents, affection and emotional support...bitch!" Dixon analyses the work by explaining,

The animations express deep-seated anxieties about the humanization of machines. They point to the recognition that as technology advances there is a gradual diminution of the differences between human and machine. Robots become more humanlike through developments in Artificial Intelligence, and humans become more robot-like as they grow more alienated and remote from their own and others' humanity through their increasing reliance upon technology. [Dixon, 279]

Humor is often used in robot and cyborg art to point out the imperfections of machines, but it is also used as a method to refract people's ultimate fear of them. Human beings have an innate desire to preserve the human race. Technology poses a threat to that

preservation, so often artists will use humor, irony or the aesthetics of camp to keep them at a distance. There are dichotomies that exist in the making of robots; they are generally funny and awkward, yet we fear their potential to take over. We feel empathy towards robots (especially the sociable robots that speak to us kinesthetically and portray human emotion), yet we do not mind watching the destruction of them either (especially those that do not look like humans). These contradictions are a reflection the struggle that exists in defining human life and our living process.

Stemming from McLuhan's ideas of mediatised consciousness, postmodern theorists argue that there is no reason to believe a living, breathing body is any better or more authentic than an electronic body. However, the French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who specialized in the meaning of human experiences, makes a clear distinction between the two types of bodies. Electronic bodies "are too far from having its density to enter into competition with it...we cannot compare the two."<sup>58</sup> Virtual bodies do not threaten our moral code nor do they compete with human bodies; more often they are developed and used to further understand universal ideas about the human condition and our living process [Dixon, 155]. I will quote Popova again in our cyborg discussion; she explains that our fear of losing human decency as a result of new technologies is unreasonable "because you can program an algorithm to give you news and information, and to analyze data in ways that are much more efficient than a human could. But I don't believe you could ever program an algorithm for morality." [NY Times, Cyborg article]

Dixon similarly argues on the point that technology cannot replace human beings. “We continue to value other humans above images, nature over media” [Dixon, 143]. Human reason can reject the seduction of technology, but I think it has to be an *active* rejection. Our society has to remain aware of the implications, potentiality and magnetism that exist in technology. As Dixon says, what we consider ‘real’ has changed over time, and it has changed in tandem with technological progress. The web, iPhone’s, and “tweople” (Twitter users) have become what we consider ‘real’ in today’s society. I think there is an importance to recognize, as reasonable humans, that this has not always been the case and it will not always be the case. We are not standing on the top of the curve as things happen below us – we are in the middle of everything and there is an endless amount of potential. Technology will continue to evolve and what we believe is ‘real’ will evolve with that progress.

### **Section 2b – *Social Constructivism: Bodies adopt technologies***

There is an assumption that was made clear in the previous section, that digital devices are not very engaging from a physical point of view. But is this postulation accurate? A gesture is defined as a dynamic movement, such as waving good-bye or shrugging your shoulders. As small as these gestures are, they are a means of physical engagement. Getting sweaty is not a requirement to be physically active. The body gestures and postures of digital technologies used in everyday life are just as physical as waving and shrugging. In a sense, our bodies are making The Network visible. By

outlining the movements of the hips, hands, fingers, arms, etc. we are really outlining the Network of which we are so much a part of both intellectually and physically. As I quoted earlier, Baym explains that we draw from our “existing repertoire of communication skills in other modes to make a medium do what we want it to do as best we can.” [Baym, 54] The same can be said of our digital gestures. Nicolas Nova, a researcher and writer at the Near Future Laboratory, and his team conducted a seven-week project documenting existing gestures in the digital everyday and then explored potential new kinds of gestures and postures.<sup>59</sup> As he explains,

“...such an endeavor is important because it helps to show how the use of such devices is a joint construction between designers and users. Some of the gestures we describe here indeed emerged from people’s everyday practices, either from a naïve perspective (lifting up one’s finger in a cell phone conversation to have better signal) or because they’re simply more practical (watching a movie in bed with the laptop shifted). Even the ones that have been ‘created’ by designers (pinching, taps, swipes, clicks) did not come out from the blue; they have been transferred from exciting habits using other objects. The description of these postures, gestures and rituals can then be seen as a way to reveal the way users domesticate new technologies.” [Nova, 9]

Nova details what these movements look like in reality, which includes awkward social situations and annoyances, as well as the ways users have adjusted their own habits to better integrate technology into their everyday lives. What I find most interesting in examining Nova’s study is how the gestures tend to correspond with our general feelings toward that device. The “Wake-Up Waggle” for example, describes the motion users make with a mouse when trying to wake a ‘sleeping’ computer. The user approaches the mouse in both an “absent-minded and mildly aggressive fashion.” And as Nova explains, this movement “feels disturbingly tied to the way we feel about computers; the mild frustration with which we often approach the device as if it should by now be guessing

when we're about to use it." [Nova, 19] Another example of this, Nova terms as "Clicker Casting." [Nova, 43] This is when a person raises the remote with an outstretched arm and forcibly presses buttons or shakes the device up and down. The aggression mostly occurs when there is a delay between performance and intention.

I am also interested in the resourcefulness of both the designers and users. Tapping, dragging, sliding, swiping, flinging, pinching, and spreading – these Nova terms as the "Touchscreen Gestures", which "allow for direct manipulation, and as such, utilizes our existing understanding of object manipulation in the physical world." [Nova, 19] These gestures came naturally to users since designers implemented movements that were already a part of our everyday repertoire. Resourcefulness of the user generally occurs, at least partially, due to laziness. "Bag Swiping" is when a public transit commuter swings their wallet or bag over the scanner without taking their card out, and often they do this without breaking stride. American writer and designer Adam Greenfield called this "information processing dissolving in behavior": an interaction between a person and an information-processing system that proceeds automatically without the consciousness of what is taking place."<sup>60</sup> Another example of user ingenuity Nova termed the "Lazy Viewer." This is when people adopt new postures in order to use digital technologies while lying in bed or collapsed on a sofa. Often times this means resting a laptop on its side in order to see it while lying on your side. This gesture seems to have been addressed by newer devices that now have accelerometers that automatically rotate content according to the devices orientation [Nova, 91]. In these examples, both the designers and users are developing technologies based on bodily implementation. All that



being said, it is clear that although users are not always breaking a sweat while using their devices, they are physically active.

French director-playwright-performer, Robert Lepage, is known for his imaginative, and sometimes controversial, use of technology in his performance work. He explains that his incorporation of technology is not just to attract audiences, but also to provide something relatable and recognizable to his diverse audience members. He believed the French theater at the time was discriminatory in that, it only spoke to a specific audience with knowledge of local narratives and politics. In her article, "*Juliette at Zulu Time: Robert Lepage and the aesthetics of techno-en-scene*," Aleksandar Sasha Dundjerovic writes that Lepage "found a response to that isolationist problem through the language of multimedia, particularly with the use of film and technology, as a way of achieving cross-cultural communication with an international audience."<sup>61</sup> This notion is similar to artist Laurie Anderson's argument that, "technology is a gathering place for humanity." [Dundjerovic, 71] As a multi-media artist, Anderson's performance pieces are generally a hybrid of visual and musical elements. She is a pioneer in the use of electronic technology, which is significant considering electronics is a typically male-dominated arena. Similar to Anderson, Lepage believes that technology, rather than taking away any realism, actually highlights the 'liveness' of the performers [Dundjerovic, 72]. He is actively gaining the viewers' empathy through the incorporation of technology. By empathy, here I mean a kind of connection between viewer and art in which the viewer would move into and inhabit the various features of the artwork. In

Lepage's case, the viewer can empathize with the characters using technology because of their own experiences with cell phones, computers, film, etc.

Technology is often used to intervene and enhance the magic of performance as well, taking the work to another level. Virtual Realities (VR), for example, attempt to place the participant *within* the work instead of remaining outside the piece as an observer. As Ken Pimentel and Kevin Teixeira explain, the primary characteristic of virtual reality "is immersion: inclusion, being surrounded by an environment. VR places the participant inside the information." [Dixon, 324] Similar to most performances (theater, dance, film, etc.), virtual reality is about illusions – it takes the audience to a new kind of reality. "Virtual Reality is where the computer disappears and you become the ghost in the machine." [Dixon, 365]. Margot Lovejoy agrees, stating in her book *Postmodern Currents: Art & Artists in the Age of Electronic Media*, "Virtual reality is virtual precisely because it is both abstract and real. The remarkable nature of simulation is that there are no limits to what can be realistically represented." [Lovejoy, 160] Sounds enchanting, does it not? So why have the potentials of virtual reality gone largely unexplored as compared to other digital technologies in performance? Why are we still so behind in this field?

Dixon explains that it is about time and money/resources [Dixon, 393]. I agree that those factors have slowed pace of VR advancement. But I think it is also interesting to revisit some of our previous discussions related to our fear of the machine taking over – the fear of becoming cyborgs. Maybe we are afraid to completely loose ourselves in

these alternate realities because we are afraid of the machine taking over. Consider for a moment the 2010 film, “Inception,” which was written and directed by Christopher Nolan. Though this was based on deep subconscious states (and not VR), there was a real threat to getting lost or stuck in this alternate state of reality. I believe people hold the same fear of being lost in VR worlds. Virtual Realities, as Dixon explains, have changed our perception of the world by redefining both space and time. Pimentel and Teixeira have noted that, “seeing the representation of your hand suddenly changes the perspective. You now have a perceptual anchor in the virtual world. You’re actually inside the computer because you can see your hand in there.” [Dixon, 366] On the topic of virtual realities, Lovejoy warns that our understanding of the corporeal self is being altered due to our now ‘simulated environment’.

“In reducing experience to the efficient common denominator of information, aspects of the body and of the computer have begun to transmigrate. The body becomes more mechanized at the same rate the computer becomes more friendly. The boundaries between the spheres of the body and of technology have begun to transgress, overlap, and blur. The computer’s capability to create completely simulated worlds has further distanced the body from tactility.” [Lovejoy, 85]

On the opposite end of the spectrum, Brenda Laurel explains that the virtual world is actually a spiritual space bringing us closer to nature and our natural selves. She describes VR as, “a distinctly new space, but ultimately one of return: a place to reinvent the sacred spaces where we collaborate with reality in order to transform it and ourselves.” [Dixon, 368] Though I am sure there are many who would disagree with her assessment, I find it refreshing to think about these spaces as meditative and reflective instead of scary and ‘other-ly.’ A place where “VR adults play and use their imaginations like children,” [Dixon, 394] sounds poetic and enchanting. However, I must agree with

Lovejoy's assessment that, "artists need to be involved with new technologies in order to define and exploit their creative potential." [Lovejoy, 213] There is a need for active awareness in virtual realities if we are to experience contemplation and reflection – it will not happen instinctively without mindful consideration.

Once again I find myself considering our previous discussions regarding cyborgs. Hollywood has provided us with films like *Robocop*, *The Bionic Man*, and *Ironman* in which cyborgs appear all-powerful. We are given the illusion that technology in association with the body can make us stronger, more intelligent, and even more authoritative. The work of performance artist, Stelarc, attempts to portray a similar notion. He focuses heavily on extending the capabilities of the human body through the use and incorporation of technology. In one performance Stelarc allowed his body to be controlled remotely by electronic muscle stimulators connected to the Internet. He has also performed with a robotic third arm, a spider-like walking machine (which he sits in the center of and controls through arm gestures), and he had a cell-cultivated ear surgically attached to his arm. Stelarc refers to himself as if he is himself a machine saying, "the body" instead of "my body." He attempts to negate the body all together in his quest to become a cyborg arguing in one of his artist statements that, "the hollow body would be a better host for technological components."<sup>62</sup>

He sees new media technologies as both alien and superior to our own body's biological and neurological capabilities...Information propels the body beyond itself and...fashions the form and function of the post-evolutionary body. [Dixon, 316]

Stelarc is concerned with modifying the body and extending it with technology so that it can physically function in the electronic world [Dixon, 317].

Stelarc is doing groundbreaking work in the development of technological performance art, however he is also quite controversial. Many argue that he takes body art to “dehumanizing extremes.” [Dixon, 317] And although he sees his own body as obsolete, there is no denying that he has a body as he conducts most of his performances nude. We know he is an older white male and viewers will make certain associations about the male body in his work, there is no denying that fact. Victor Seidler writes in “Embodied Knowledge and Virtual Space,” which is a section of the book “The Virtual Embodied” edited by John Wood, how men often suppress the body in order to display dominant masculinity.

Testing yourself against the limits of your body as a way of affirming your masculinity makes you insensitive to your relationship with your body. This reinforces the Cartesian notion which treats the body as part of matter, so impersonalizing the relationship and setting it in instrumental terms. It is a matter of the body being obedient to the commands of the mind, and being punished if it fails to do so. There can be no communication which transgresses these boundaries, for the body is taken to be part of an inner nature. So it is that men and women in different ways learn to leave the body behind, at some level still linked to the ‘sins of the flesh.’ We learn to ‘rise above’ our animal natures so that we can identify with a pure reason which generates disembodied knowledge. Taking knowledge to be ‘real’ if it is objective and universal, there is a fear of the subjective and the personal. We feel uneasy with emotions and feelings as sources of knowledge. This helps us to grasp ways that feminism and ecology served as challenges to modernity, but also to grasp ways we often think about technology.<sup>63</sup> [Seidler, 19]

In short, rather than treating the body as a separate entity, we need to learn to bring the body and mind in relation to one another. The masculine dream is to control our experiences and control the meanings we assign to our experiences. But as Freud argues

(as explained by Seidler), people often suppress certain emotions if it threatens their social identity. For example, men often deny feelings of fear because it is not considered a ‘manly’ feeling to express, but often these suppressed emotions take shape in our unconscious minds [Seidler, 19]. This affects both the ways we can be with ourselves and relate to others. Seidler advises that we learn to listen to our bodies and recognize it as an important “source of knowledge.” [Seidler, 18]

### **Section 2c – Conclusion: Embodiment and somatic engagement**

It is important that we understand the changing landscape of the technological age and maintain an active sense of bodily awareness, or embodiment. The infamous mind and body dualism has plagued the Western mindset for centuries. The dichotomization obscures the social impact of new technologies. So when I speak of “the body,” this is more than just a noun, more than just our physical being. I would like to emphasize the ideas of action and practice in using terms like embodiment and bodily awareness. As John Wood writes in his book *The Virtual Embodied*,

We may understand the acquisition of knowledge or, more subjectively, ‘wisdom,’ as an insight into what we are, in our ‘becoming,’ as human beings. In this sense we could also think of individual embodiment as an aspect of our general predicament in the changing present... [Wood, 2]

I believe it is more important today than ever before to think of the mind and body as one. As Rudolf Arnheim explains, the world is not simply understood through perception

as a random collection of data, but rather as a structured whole. Perception itself is structured and ordered.

It seems safe to assert that all motor acts are expressive, even though in different degrees, and that they all carry the experience of corresponding higher mental processes, if ever so faintly. Therefore, it is inadequate to describe expressive movements as mere atavisms, as Darwin did. Many of them are physical acts that take place because of their inner correspondence with the state of mind of the person who performs them. ...The human organism always functions as a whole, physically and psychically.<sup>64</sup>

In other words, human beings operate as a whole, using both the body and the mind. All actions are expressive and they all correspond with mental processes. There is no conscious part of us that directs our behavior independently of our bodies.<sup>65</sup> We discussed in Section 1c of this paper, the value in pursuing a middle ground between the determinists and constructivists as the arguments relate to psychological effects. The same can be said of our discussion of physical effects in this section; I believe we can find the balance by trusting the indications of our bodies, and connecting our inner and outer realities.

As Steve Dixon explains, “Bodies are particular, not general. Bodies are not animated cadavers...Bodies embody consciousness; to talk of disembodied consciousness is a contradiction in terms.” [Dixon, 212] Ellen Dissanayake, in part, attributes this to the biology of human beings. She explains that, “at least some of the intense pleasures of aesthetic experience are insistently bodily, and therefore physicality cannot be totally discounted as irrelevant.”<sup>66</sup> Simply stated, the mind and body are one – neither is more important than the other. If we revisit Serman’s *Telematic Dreaming*, and consider how Kozel performs for several hours a day as both a corporeal body and a virtual one. The

success of this piece is largely due to Kozel's physical and emotional engagement with the work. Her presence in this piece is an example of how digital technology (the mind) and performance (the body) can combine to create something unique and exquisite.

As we discussed earlier with regard to text messages, the notion of 'liveness' and 'what is real' has been a topic of discussion ever since film footage was included in live theatre almost a century ago. As argued by Auslander, 'presence' does not have to be a body in the space; film can have just as much 'presence' as a live performance.<sup>67</sup> In Werner Herzog's *Wild Blue Yonder*, an alien narrates the story of his dying planet, human's destruction of earth, and astronauts attempting to find an alternate planet for humans to live on. Herzog uses simple camera techniques and documentary, 'live' footage of a frozen underwater scene in an attempt to distort our perception of what is 'real' and 'true.'<sup>68</sup> The narrator is telling us we are watching footage of another planet, but in reality we see footage of the very familiar ocean. Can I buy into the fabricated story when the scenery is so familiar? In comparison to James Cameron's "*Avatar*," generally speaking, people are more likely to 'believe' in *Avatar* than we are to buy into Herzog's presentation of our own reality. Does today's society need computer-generated images in order to believe the story? As Daniel Zalewski writes in his review of the film,

Herzog believes that modern life has disconnected humans from their most elemental pleasures. His films, accordingly, attempt to connect modern cinemagoers to their prelapsarian selves: the emotions are always primal, and landscape is integral to the drama.<sup>69</sup>

Herzog believes that his films portray the "ecstatic truth" of mankind. In other words, he adds something more to the 'truth' than just reported facts. I appreciate here that,



although Herzog believes our modern society has become detached, he doesn't blame technological advances. Instead he utilizes the core capabilities of technology to portray his 'truthful' message.

Artist and writer, Suzi Gablik, agrees with Herzog's argument regarding mankind's detachment from our natural being-ness and argues further that, "we are losing our sense of the divine side of life, of the power of imagination, myth, dream and vision."<sup>70</sup> I agree with Gablik on her conception that, in order to be subjective and re-realize the power of magical perception, human beings should engage and explore with their entire being. There is great power in her claim that, "When we experience the world as our own body, illusions of duality dissolve, and with them, old assumptions about a distinct and separate ego-self codified by our culture." [Gablik, 54] What I struggle with, however, is the blame she places on medical and technological advances. Do we have to deny progress in order to be aware of our subjectivity? I don't believe so, instead if human beings become actively aware of technological progress – if we gain certainty of it's implications – we can remain objective.

As Herzog does in *Wild Blue Yonder*, we should use technology to our advantage and not just because it is flashy. The goal of technology is to bring about new possibilities. In order to do this, we must reach beyond what has been established already. Technology presents us the opportunity to do real good in the world if we practice heightened consciousness. Technologist Sherry Turkle calls for personal transformation:

If we cultivate our awareness of what stands behind our screen personae, we are more likely to succeed in using virtual experience for personal transformation ... Our need for a practical philosophy of self-knowledge has never been greater as we struggle to make meaning from our lives on the screen.<sup>71</sup>

We need to acknowledge, with greater awareness and responsibility, that which is already occurring in the world of technology. And as I stated earlier in accordance with Nam June Paik's approach, our goal in using technology cannot be to overlook engagement in living; it should encourage engagement and awareness. Seidler takes this idea further by claiming that thinking only with the mind will leave us "estranged from our bodies and from emotions and feelings as sources of knowledge." But if we can access that intuitive knowledge without feeling apprehensive, we will learn to become more empathetic towards each other.

"So it is that an engagement with new technologies can help in the refiguring of traditional forms of philosophy and social theory which have been largely blind to the possibilities of embodied knowledge." [Seidler, 29]

He is suggesting here, that one way to make sense of our everyday lives is to think carefully and consider the ethics of new technologies. There are many fundamental and deeply humanist questions we are faced with as technology becomes poignant in our lives. It is crucial that we address these questions and explore the moral values in which people approach their devices.

### Section 3 – *My Body of Video Artwork: “New Pedestrians”*

The function of art is to show people as they really are, rather than as they think they are. Artist George Tooker did just that with his social realist, figure paintings. His earlier works consisted of

“haunting images of trapped clerical workers and forbidding government offices expressed a peculiarly 20th-century brand of anxiety and alienation... Luminous and poetic, his paintings often conveyed a sense of dread...his generalized figures, with their smoothly modeled sculptural forms and masklike faces, seemed to dwell outside of time, even when placed in contemporary settings.”<sup>72</sup>

Tooker portrayed real human emotion in his paintings and his technique evoked those emotions in his viewer as well. Photographer Garry Winogrand similarly depicted social issues of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in his work.

“He was a prolific photographer and his images capture what is known as the ‘decisive moment’. Winogrand’s subject was America. He documented the city and the urban landscape, concentrating on its unusual people and capturing odd juxtapositions of animate and inanimate objects. He made the city, the zoo, the airport and the rodeo his home, and spent endless hours photographing these and other locations.”<sup>73</sup>

In his photography book titled, “The Man in the Crowd,” Winogrand documents the streets of New York City in the late 1960s and early 70s, freezing moments in time and capturing the spirit of individuals living in the city. Philip-Lorca diCorcia, another New York City street photography, developed a similar series in 2002 titled “Heads.” diCorcia attached a powerful light to scaffolding above the street in Times Square and activated the light by radio signal, capturing unwitting pedestrians in a flash of light from over 20 feet away. The passersby were unaware their photo was being taken since the flash went off in broad daylight and it was so far away. Unlike Winogrand, who captured what we

would have seen with our own eyes walking the streets of New York, diCorcia's photographs are specifically framed and dripping with aestheticism. "The figures appear to emerge from inky darkness, spotlighted and haloed and as if there was almost no distance between the camera and the subject."<sup>74</sup>

Art has been a mirror to society for centuries, and it is no different in my own body of video artworks. By artificially constructing situations of everyday life, and pushing the absurdity of those moments, my most recent body of work, titled *New Pedestrians*, takes a critical but humorous look at how smart phone technology has become a poignant player in our connections and rituals. And yet, as noticeable as they have become in our relationships, they have become almost invisible in our everyday lives. Technology allows us to control how we present ourselves and where we put our attention. However, as the videos attempt to portray, these devices also have control over us: our bodies, our communities, and our relationships. My intention is not to deter people away from their devices; the work is not an attack on mobile technology. Rather, it is meant to be a mirror for users to reflect on their own habits. The pieces I describe here ask the viewer to develop a more self-aware, examined relationship with mobile technology. My hopes that through this examination, users will begin to ask questions about what is most sustaining in our customs.

I began my research for *New Pedestrians* considering the history of pedestrian movement in choreography. This began in the early 1960s with the Judson Dance Theatre and choreographers like Steve Paxton and Yvonne Rainer. Their goal was to remove the

formality of ballet technique in choreography, and instead incorporate everyday movement into their dance language. This allowed the audience to better empathize with the work and experience a more kinesthetic response as they could imagine themselves performing the movements. In my own research, I first conducted a series of movement studies looking at how people interact with their digital devices. I brought a number of participants into a studio space and instructed them to, very simply, use their digital device as they normally would. I gave instructions like, “sit in this chair and use this laptop to check your facebook,” or “put your earbuds in, find a song on your iPod and start listening.” I recorded the subtleties in their movements and took note of each gesture employed. This early research grew into a much bigger body of video artworks considering how users interact with smart phones in particular. The work is meant to be a mirror for smart phone users to reflect on their own habits, therefore the work highlights specific new pedestrian movements we have developed with our daily use of smart phone technology.

Upon entering the *New Pedestrians* video exhibition, displayed on a pedestal in the center of the space was a Quick Response (QR) code [Figure 8], which is a type of matrix barcode that smart phone users could scan to activate an audio tour. The audio tour regulated how visitors navigated the space, further amplifying ideas of control. The audio tour begins with instructions to “spin around in a circle while looking at all of the videos, one after the other as you spin. Do this at least two times...take in the work on a holistic scale before we move closer in to examine each piece.” As the viewer spins, they observed what artist Tino Sehgal refers to as, “staged situations.”<sup>75</sup> Sehgal’s work is

comprised of one or more people carrying out instructions conceived by the artist. He uses the human voice, movement, and interaction in his situations, which are generally staged in museums or galleries, and executed by trained individuals he refers to as “interpreters.” [Midgette] My work employs similar actions that also involve one or more people carrying out instructions I send them via text message. Similarly, I refer to my participants as “interpreters”, since the individuals in the work are free to interpret the texts however they want. Many times they follow the directions very literally, sometimes they interpret them differently than I originally intend, and occasionally they don’t follow them at all. The activities in our pieces resemble the routines of everyday life, which as a result emphasizes its artificiality. Sehgal explains that his use of movement “was a way of producing something and nothing at the same time.” [Midgette] I also see the movement in my work as a metaphor for effect technology has had on presence and absence. We both place attention on society and human relations. The difference however, is that Sehgal is interested primarily with the interaction that arises between the audience and the interpreters. Whereas, I am concerned with how my participants interact with their phones, with one another, with the audience, and with me as the controller. Comparably, Sehgal and I are both interested in the human behavior and movement as they occur in our everyday habits and routines.

In each of the videos in *New Pedestrians*, I send my interpreters instructions to follow via text message (which are displayed as they happened in real time, in the bottom right corner of the final videos). The only thing I tell them ahead of time is to keep their eyes on their phones the entire time, unless otherwise directed. I personally, play a vital

role in my pieces as the domineering choreographer attempting to control every move of my participants through mobile communication. The interpreters are, however, free to do as they please – they are ultimately in control of the work. Each of them puts their own spin on the instruction when acting it out, thereby being controlled by their phones while simultaneously controlling how they present themselves in the work. We can compare this happening to relationships that are formed online. When two people meet online, questions are generally raised about how honest a person is being about who they are and whether the individual can be trusted. And it is often believed, which we discussed earlier, that since there are less social cues in digital interactions we have considerably more control in shaping the ways we present ourselves to others. We can present the perfect version of ourselves digitally.

But regardless of how we present ourselves, in digital communications we will have very limited cues with which to interpret each other, and we may or may not make of those cues the meaning the other had intended. In a *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* article, social psychologists describe people as “cognitive misers” who try to get as much information as possible out of very few cues. In mediated communication, there are great deals of indicators missing, so people tend to make a bigger deal out of small details (like the person’s email address or the timing of a message) than we might in face-to-face interactions.<sup>76</sup> This very thing happened in my videos; the interpreters tended to over emphasize certain parts of the messages that I had not originally intended. For example, at one point during a piece I instructed my interpreters to “search for service.” Now my intention was to simply have them stand in

place and hold their phone up in the air, but some participants frantically walked all around the space while moving their phone around as if they were metal detectors searching for gold in the sky. The pieces were ultimately in the hands of the interpreters, making the work much like that of the Fluxus movement during the 1960s. During this time, artists such as Nam Jun Paik, Marcel Duchamp, George Brecht, and Yoko Ono employed randomness into performance by integrating the audience into the work. The Fluxus belief was that the viewer completed the work of art, not the artist.<sup>77</sup> Though I attempt to control my pieces with digital messages, it is ultimately the interpreters and the passing pedestrians who complete the work.

For the piece titled “In a Courtyard,” [Figure 1, Figure 11] I brought a group of 10 interpreters to a heavily walked courtyard and proceed to send them instructions like, “search 4 service” and “walk up and down the staircase 5 times.” When the interpreters are still, or sitting in the background, the lack of awareness from the passersby becomes obvious. Their heads were down as they walked with their phones and seemed unfazed by the piece happening – they are very clearly experiencing what we have discussed throughout this paper, ‘absent-presence’. They are physically in the space with us, but their thoughts and mental processes elsewhere. Although it is quite common to see this happen today, when the footage is slowed down and we examine it closer, the act becomes strangely unusual.

“In a Courtyard,” as well as a few other pieces in *New Pedestrians*, also portrays the blurring boundary between public and private spaces. In this respect, the work relates



to that of Blast Theory, which is a group of artists based in Brighton, UK who use interactive media to create new-age performances and interactive artworks that mix audiences across the Internet. In the explanation of their approach they state,

“We remain fascinated with how technology, especially mobile devices, creates new cultural spaces in which the work is customized and personalized for each participant and what the implications of this shift might be for artistic practice. How are the economically and culturally disenfranchised engaged amid a culture of planned obsolescence and breathless futurism?”<sup>78</sup>

In their piece, “Rider Spoke,” the audience is invited to bicycle through the streets of the city, searching for a hiding place to record a short message about their lives on a handheld computer. Once they have found a spot and recorded a message, they are encouraged to then search for the hiding places of others and listen to their messages. The more stories you record, the more you can find. The voice of Ju Ro Farr, an artist of Blast Theory, helps navigate participants through the work as they are guided around the city and encouraged to reconsider their physical and psychic relationship with the city.<sup>79</sup>

David Williams, writer for Real Time Magazine, partook in “Rider Spoke,” and wrote this of his experience:

“At times, Rider Spoke feels as if it is navigating the boundaries of a new public privacy, encouraging the making of confessions while surrounded by strangers. In a sense, this is quite an ordinary experience—after all, we do this unthinkingly almost every day as we talk on mobile phones, often discussing the most personal and intimate details in public spaces, often at relatively loud volumes. Somehow we expect that, in the city, no one will listen. Or if they do, that there is no way anyone will remember. In Rider Spoke the city’s nooks and crannies, the eddies in its flow of near-continuous movement, are reframed as spaces of memory, contemplation and intimacy. Small secrets play out privately in public spaces, and their presence suggests the elusive passage of many more, just out of my audio reach, suggesting that if only I could cycle every inch of the city and discover all of its hiding places, every delicate secret might be revealed.”<sup>80</sup>

As is apparent in this work, new communication technologies are creating new social spaces where private and public are seamlessly interwoven. Comparably, in the happenings I construct in populated areas, like “In a Courtyard,” I attempt to point out this boundary blurring between public and private. Within the first 10 seconds of the piece, at least 3 pedestrians pass by the camera while conducting private phone conversations.

The next piece in the series, titled “In a Field,” [Figure 2, Figure 12] took place with 11 interpreters in a softball outfield. The focus shifts in this piece toward the interactions employed between the interpreters. At times they are instructed to “push some1 as hard as u can,” and “take a picture of some1 then yell at them, you broke it!” As the interpreters became more comfortable performing the instructions, they took more liberty in their interpretations, often pushing them further than indicated. When told to “push some1” they responded by pushing everyone. I also split the group into two groups at one point during this piece between what I termed “dancers” and “walkers.” This allowed for more collaboration between players and more variation in the absurdity of instructions. At one point I have the “dancers” look into each other’s eyes and physically lean on one another. While working on this piece I was considering communities and networks that take place both on and offline. Social networking sites allow us to experience what is referred to as “networked individualism,” in which each person sits at the center of his or her own personal community. This ability to communicate with others in the absence of shared space in real time sometimes invokes fears of separation from physical reality. As we lose connection to space, do we also become detached from the

family, friends & neighbors whose interconnections civil society depend on? Not always – in many instances the Internet can enhance connections to one another. Two researchers, Campbell and Kwak found that using the mobile phone for civic purposes was more likely when people were comfortable with the technology.<sup>81</sup> So the question becomes, how can designers create technology, and how can users implement that technology into their lives in a way that encourages a balance of both civic service and “networked individualism?” The message hope to send is that new media do not offer inauthentic simulations that detract from or substitute for real engagement. What happens through mediation is interwoven, not juxtaposed, with everything else.

After completing these two works with larger groups of people, I decided to work with smaller groups for the next few pieces in order to portray ideas of solitude, relationships, and intimate spaces. In the piece titled, “In a Vineyard,” [Figure 13] a group of women wear dresses and use patterned cell phone cases. They are gathered in an open space where we were mostly secluded and received instructions like, “do a cartwheel” and “laugh as loud as u can, then stop abruptly.” The most interesting moment in this piece comes when the group takes pictures with their phones of the camera filming them. When the piece is projected onto the gallery wall [Figure 3], this moment evokes a direct interaction between the video and gallery viewer. This direct interaction fosters a moment of self-reflection from the viewer and encourages them to begin questioning their own habits with cell phones.

I gathered another small group in the piece “On a Street,” [Figure 4, Figure 14] in which 4 interpreters follow instructions in and around a busy street. At one point the interpreters are told to “cross the street 5 times, mind the cars.” There is a direct correlation here to the recent hype around driving, biking, or walking while texting. In the audio tour the gallery visitor is asked, “Have you ever crossed the street while texting? Next time you use your device while walking, consider your body. What is your posture and where is your focus? Can we be present while using the technology and bring our attention back to our bodies?” As I mentioned earlier, my dance instructor, Chris Aiken, posed a similar question regarding the way we lifted our arms while driving. My hope is that by asking this question to the viewer while watching the action, they will recall the question the next time they text and walk -- similar to my own recollection of Aiken’s question when I drive my car.

In a more intimate situation, “At a Picnic” [Figure 5, Figure 15] consists of interpreters Aron Fischer and Bethanie Collins attempting to enjoy a meal together, but instead continually get distracted by their phones. A happening most visitors have likely seen before while out at a restaurant, this piece is meant to be familiar, but also unusual when called out in such a way. At the end of the awkward meal together Collins throws her glass of water in Fischer’s face, which is meant to portray a fit of frustration at the lack of focused communication. However, as the audio tour explains, “my intention here is not to deter you away from your device; this work is not an attack on smart phones. Rather, take this time to reflect on your own habits. Through this examination, Langdon

hopes that you will begin to ask questions about what is most sustaining in human connection and courtesy.”

*New Pedestrians* continues with two corresponding solo pieces titled “Follow the GPS #1” and “Follow the GPS #2” [Figure 6, Figure 16, Figure 17]. In these works, instructions are sent to the two interpreters as if trying to get them to a certain destination. Though both interpreters appear to be alone in the striking vast spaces, they are ever connected to their devices. With the smart phone, we never have to be alone. We are always connected. However, it is generally in times of solitude that we find ourselves, reflect, and then learn how to communicate with others. There is a growing need for people to develop a more self-aware, examined relationship with technology, so that it can help us rather than control us.

The keystone piece in *New Pedestrians* is titled “Around Downtown” [Figure 7, Figure 18], which is comprised of 15 interpreters following instructions in the downtown area of Columbia, Missouri. This culminating work incorporates many of the instructions developed in earlier pieces, as well as new instructions that push the absurdity further. At this point in the audio tour, I revisit the artist statement and overall idea behind the work that, “As the smart phone moves from being foreign to common, now is the time to question and thoughtfully consider what role we want mobile technology to play in our connections and our relationships.” Listeners are advised to sit on the floor so they are more inclined to spend time watching the video, laughing at the actions, and reflecting on their own habits with digital media.

There are a number of editing techniques used in each of the pieces that amplify the conceptual objective as well. In each of the pieces I employ layering and repetition in order to impose a machine-like regularity to the videos and highlight our habits with digital media [Figure 10]. I have taken cues here from Troika Ranch's performance titled, "loopdiver," in which a 6-minute performance was transformed digitally into a 60-minute long video and paired on stage with live choreography.

"While the digital materials (video, sound, light) maintain the absolute precision and perfection of the computer, the learned choreography is necessarily imperfect due to human interpretation. When placed together on stage, we see the performers in a constant struggle to adapt to an externally imposed machine rhythm. *loopdiver* asks the viewer to join in on this simultaneously dreamlike and maddening journey as the performers attempt to escape their prisons of repetition. The meaning of the materials grows and changes as it appears again and again, ultimately challenging us to dive in a break free of our own repetitive and potentially destructive behavior."<sup>82</sup>

As discussed earlier, we are at risk of developing detrimental habits with our technology when we are not mindful of ourselves. The repetition present in *New Pedestrians* is meant to directly comment on that vulnerability. The timing in the video footage has also been adjusted at moments, both slowing down and speeding up at certain moments during each piece. With our smart phones in hand, we now have the ability to transcend time. The time alterations made in the videos are meant to represent how the interpreters are feeling about time at any given moment. If they received instructions to do a strange action like, "pretend to be a chicken," they may feel like it takes forever before they receive a new instruction. Whereas a simple direction like, "send a text message," may feel like it only takes a few seconds to accomplish.

The video editing not only points to the overall message of the work, but it also amplifies the humor. Some specific messages are also meant to augment humor in the work. It is hard not to laugh when a lone interpreter jumps up and down and cheers for herself, like in “Follow the GPS#2.” Humor is often employed in performance to highlight much deeper societal trends. Improv Everywhere is a New York City-based prank collective that was created by Charlie Todd and “causes scenes of chaos and joy in public places.”<sup>83</sup> They recently put together a prank titled, “Seeing Eye People,” in which city workers provided an outlandish solution to the “texting and walking” epidemic in New York. The team of 60 participants was divided into two groups: half were the “Seeing Eye People” wearing orange vests, and half were individuals texting and walking, connected to the Seeing Eye People via leashes. A second version was also staged where the Seeing Eye People went up to real people texting and walking on the street and offered the service. The results of the prank are hilarious – a number of bystanders take out their phones to photograph the participants being walked on leashes, while others don’t even notice what is happening since their own heads are down [Todd]. *New Pedestrians* similarly encourages viewers to laugh at how nonsensical it is to have our phones constantly in hand. As Todd explains, “It really is ridiculous how many of us walk and text...you can’t walk more than a block without spotting someone doing it.” [Todd]

There are also moments in each piece meant to hone in on specific pedestrian movements that have been employed with smart phones. In “Around Downtown,” there is one moment when all of the interpreters are jumping up and down while one person is left standing perfectly still. Her small gestures with her phone become the center of

attention at that moment. During “In a Vineyard,” the same focus is placed on one interpreter who remains fidgeting with her device while the 4 other interpreters are frozen on screen. The idea here is to key the viewer in to these very minor motions and movements that are becoming so much a part of our everyday – similar to the pedestrian choreography employed by Yvonne Rainer in the 1960s and 70s. In her piece, *The Mind is a Muscle*, Rainer responds to the end of a decade immersed in civil rights protests, the Vietnam War, and the expanded perception of what constitutes art. These adventurous times came to be known as ‘postmodern,’ and the question “is it dance or not?” started to die out. The early days of postmodern dance claimed that any movement could be considered dance and any person (whether trained or not) was a dancer. This was a reaction to the constraints in the modern dance era, during which movement was commonly derived from emotions and moods. Rainer, and other postmodern dancers, instead understood everyday, pedestrian movement as a valid source for choreography.

“It is my overall concern to reveal people as they are engaged in various kinds of activities—alone, with each other, with objects—and to weight the quality of the human body towards that of objects and away from the super-stylization of the dancer.” —Yvonne Rainer, STATEMENT accompanying *The Mind is a Muscle*, 1968

Rainer de-romanticized the image by stripping away emotional choreography (like that of Martha Graham) and instead focused in on task-oriented movement. Similarly, at certain moments in *New Pedestrians* the focus is sharply on movements relative to smart phone tasks.

Adding to the humor of the exhibition, the tour ends with instructions to “take a selfie and Tweet it with the hashtag newpedestrians.” This reference to smart phone pop



culture is meant to key the visitor in to my overall intention, which is both critical and humorous. My hope is that by listening to the 10 minute audio tour and spending at least a few minutes with each piece, viewers will walk away with questions about what is most sustaining in human connections and rituals. By using the technology to critique the technology, I attempt to highlight the main objective of the work, which is not anti-technology, but pro-communication and pro-embodiment when using technology.

### **Conclusion**

I am sure many people can still vividly remember life before the Internet and mobile phones, and for some it feels like these advances came out of no where and took over our lives. The tendency is to think about new technologies deterministically, asking how they are changing us and what we can do to stop their infringement on our lives. However, those who have grown up with the technology an integral part of their lives will not see what all the hype is about. They see technology in a more optimistic light, considering how they provide us more resources and foster better relationships. These two perspectives co-exist with the introduction of most new technologies and neither perspective is right or wrong. The important thing to remember is that mediated communication “is an additional tool people use to connect, one which can only be understood as deeply embedded in and influenced by the daily realities of embodied life.” [Baym, 152]. Digital connections are now a part of our everyday lives and current social contexts; they are neither utopian nor dystopian. They are however, changing how we

relate to one another in countless ways, which is why it is important that we have these conversations and thoughtfully consider the implications of digital connections.

We are no longer bound by space and time in our relationships; instead we connect with one another based on ideas and commonalities. Digital networks can sometimes form based on shared practices like occupation, education and recreation. And since text is the primary form of communication, certain phrases of language become markers of insider status and help forge the group's identity [Baym, 78]. For example, the popular television show *Glee* has a number of insider blogs and a Facebook page on which the fans are referred to as "Gleeks." This is not only an indication that you watch the show, but it also signifies one of the show's core messages, which is the acceptance of social outcasts or "geeks." Many *Glee* fans also took to social media and blogs when cast member, Cory Monteith, passed away in July 2013 for support and remembrances. Users are better able with new technologies to develop communities based on shared interests rather than geographical location alone.

However, as we discussed earlier in relation to my body of video artworks, the ability to communicate with others in the absence of shared space in real time sometimes invokes fears of separation from physical reality. Technological determinists predict that these new ways of communicating cause people to substitute simulated communities for real ones. As we lose connection to space, do we also become detached from the family, friends & neighbors? Not always – in many instances the Internet can enhance connections to one another in the same physical communities. When it comes to political

engagement, Campbell and Kwak found that when people used their mobile phones to exchange opinions on issues, they were also more likely to attend a political meeting or contact a public official [Campbell, Kwak]. New media is being used in novel ways to engage people in the political process. Twitter and Facebook have been used largely to organize protests and rallies across the globe.

There is a new demand for designers to create technology that encourages a balance of civic service and “networked individualism.” New technologies allow people to come together over shared interests and transcend local communities. What has become clear in our analysis is that new media do not cause inauthentic connections, nor do they substitute for real engagement. What happens through mediation is interwoven with all other forms of communication, offering us new (not better or worse) ways to relate to one another.

“To ask whether mediated communication is as good as unmediated interaction, or whether online relationships are as good as unmediated relationships, is to miss the point. It is not a question of either/or, of one versus the other. It’s a question of who’s communicating, for what purposes, in what contexts, and what their expectations are... When people need more than mediation can provide, their use of the internet and telephones does not stop them from getting it. They just step away from the machines and get together, often using machines to coordinate that togetherness.” [Baym, 153]

In the digital age, just as with the invention of writing, new media evoke questions of what it means to be human. Mobile phones enable us to connect with one another in the absence of time and space; we are dealing with new issues of absent-presence. Our bodies can be in one environment, while our thoughts and mental process are elsewhere. We are also dealing with new tensions between our desire to control our interactions and

the increased accountability in our relationships. It is becoming ever more important to find a healthy balance of face-to-face connections as well as mediated communication. Each person should find their own “relational diet,” which should include everything from quick, keep-in-touch text messages to deep, in-person conversations [Turkle, *Fresh Air*]. This means that we have the power; we can shape our relationships with new media, with each other and with ourselves.

By leading an examined life with technology and understanding embodied interaction, technology can help lead us back to our bodies, politics, communities and planet. We can influence the development and deployment of technology if we are attentive and aware of what the media has to offer and what the consequences may be. When I consider how quickly people began using smart phones to interact with one another, I am optimistic that we will navigate through all forms of new technology without unweaving the basic structures of society: rituals and connections.

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## “New Pedestrians” Installation Illustrations



Figure 1: Show title and “In a Courtyard”



Figure 2: “In a Courtyard” and “In a Field”



Figure 3: “In a Field” and “In a Vineyard”



Figure 4: “On a Street” and “At a Picnic”



Figure 5: “At a Picnic,” “Follow the GPS #1” and “Follow the GPS #2”



Figure 6: “Follow the GPS #1” and “Follow the GPS #2”



Figure 7: "Around Downtown"



Figure 8: Audio Tour poster on pedestal



Figure 9: "New Pedestrians" overall



Figure 10: "New Pedestrians" overall with people

## “New Pedestrians” Video Still Illustrations



Figure 11: “In a Courtyard”



Figure 12: "In a Field"





Figure 13: "In a Vineyard"

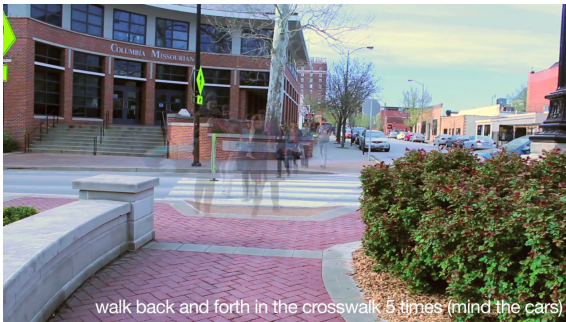
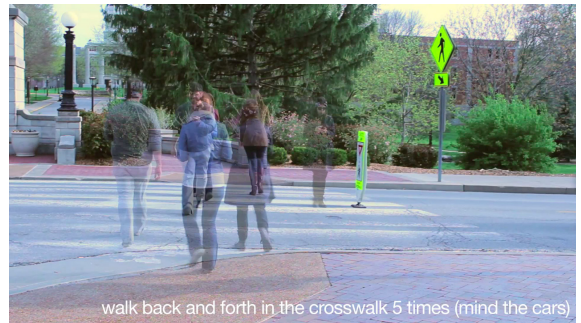


Figure 14: "On a Street"



Figure 15: "At a Picnic"



Figure 16: "Follow the GPS #1"



Figure 17: "Follow the GPS #2"

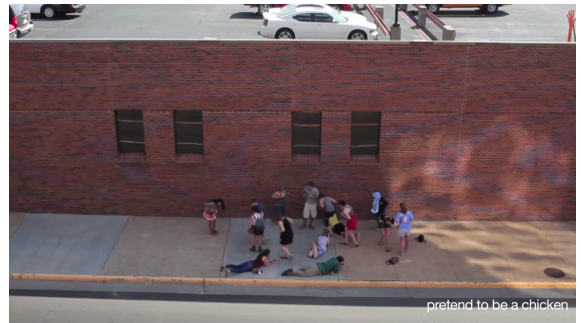
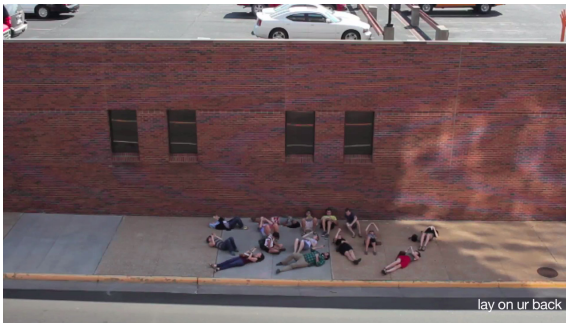


Figure 18: "Around Downtown"