

(Un)

NANCY CONSTANDELIA
CORPORATE MASSAGE
FINN MARCHANT
AMY PRCEVICHDivid-
ed*New Individualisms in an Age
of Distraction*Atten-
tion*Emergent technologies have consistently posed a moral
threat to our attentional capacity.*

In *The Metropolis and Mental Life* (1903), German sociologist and philosopher Georg Simmel articulated the widespread fear felt by city-dwellers of 'being levelled, swallowed up in the social-technological mechanism'.¹ Three decades later, Walter Benjamin theorised a burgeoning new condition of '[r]eception in distraction'², an increasing means of engaging with art forms typified in the mass consumption of film. Radio, cinema and television were successively condemned for their damaging effects on cognitive function, while the internet and digital technologies are the latest to be regarded with the same suspicion. The current proliferation of clickbait headlines³ and self-help books signalling the end of our attention spans is merely a continuation of this historical recurrence, an ideological tendency that points to a larger anxiety – the dissolution of the 'whole' human subject – in exchange for a fragmented and divided self.⁴

Why does a reduced attention span, and its effect of producing an unstable self, arouse such panic? Part of the answer, at least, can be located in the logic of economic individualism, an ethic that emerged alongside the growth of industrial societies in nineteenth-century Western Europe. As mercantilism declined, classical liberal values strengthened. Increasing economic mobility bolstered a belief in individual liberty and self-interest, the primacy of reason as well as limited government intervention in the market. Rapid technological advancement coincided with the spread of economic individualism, and the two necessarily clashed. Technology threatened the very basis of this dominant form of individualism: one's own capacity to generate wealth. In addition to bringing about the redundancy of human labour, engagement with technology produced distraction, thus hindering productivity.

Two hundred years later this attitude still lingers; remodelled and repackaged as neoliberal capitalism. In this latest version of economic individualism, success is epitomised by the entrepreneurial go-getter, who prides herself on her single-mindedness, determination and dogged resolve. This familiar cognitive model is endangered by the way that technology conditions our minds. As Nicholas G. Carr warily notes in *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains* (2010), 'calm, focused, undistracted, the linear mind is being pushed aside by a new kind of mind that wants and needs to take in and dole out information in short, disjointed, overlapping bursts – the faster the better',⁵ at the risk of disengaging from deeper, slower thinking. N. Katherine Hayles describes these two cognitive types as those of 'hyper' and 'deep' attention. Deep attention is the domain of the enterprising mind, while hyper attention is favoured by the incipient Gen Z, who move far more nimbly through virtual space than any of their predecessors.⁶ Surely the two both have their merits, producing different forms of knowledge. This raises an epistemological question regarding the validity of these knowledge categories, an aside to this exhibition and essay, but nonetheless an important and necessary discussion that needs to take place.

¹ Georg Simmel, 'The Metropolis and Mental Life' in Joanne Morra and Marquard Smith (eds.), *Visual Culture: Spaces of Visual Culture*, Routledge, London and New York, 2006, p. 52

² Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility' in Brigid Doherty, Michael W. Jennings, Thomas Y. Levin (eds.), *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*, Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 2008, p. 40

³ A quick Google search retrieves the following headlines, among others: 'Is the internet killing our brains?', '5 Ways Your Technology Is Destroying You (and What to Do About It)', 'The Real Reason Technology Destroys Your Attention Span', '4 Ways Technology is Gradually Ruining Humanity'

⁴ Patrick Crogan and Samuel Kinsley, 'Paying Attention: Towards a Critique of the Attention Economy', *Culture Machine*, vol. 13, 2012, p. 7

⁵ Nicholas G. Carr, *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains*, W.W. Norton & Co., New York, 2010, p. 10

⁶ N. Katherine Hayles, 'Hyper and Deep Attention: The Generational Divide in Cognitive Modes', *Profession 2007*, 2007, p. 188

(*Un*)*Divided Attention* is neither an embrace nor a rejection of the dispersal of thought, but rather uses attention as a springboard for thinking about alternative modes of being, given current economic systems which privilege efficiency and ‘getting things done’. The artists, **Nancy Constandelia** (NSW), **Corporate Massage** (artist duo Ellen.gif and Vicki Power (NSW)), **Finn Marchant** (NSW) and **Amy Prcevich** (VIC) touch upon the experience of attention and distraction within a broader field of differing concerns.

Amy Prcevich’s series of text-based interventions into the gallery space, entitled *Site as Situation* (2017) form a structural mesh or frame within which the other artworks sit. Comprising three short phrases, ‘Gather, observe, reflect, discuss’, ‘This is a block of text that will have the effect of making the audience look up and take a step back,’ and ‘The line extends past its physical end’, strategically positioned throughout the gallery, Prcevich exploits the institutional conventions associated with exhibition spaces to enact a ‘slowing-down’, or, at the very least, a ‘making-aware’ of one’s body moving through space. As visitors to a gallery, we implicitly navigate behavioural norms and customary ways of engaging with art. This creates a highly self-conscious experience, which Peter Osborne aptly describes:

We go to the gallery, in part, to be distracted from the cares and worries of the world. To be so distracted, we must attend to the artworks on display. Yet, once there, the kind of attention demanded by the works (and by the institutional context) – contemplative immersion – can produce an anxiety that itself generates a need for distractions. This need develops either because the work does not seem able to sustain such attention, or, perhaps, because of the disciplinary character of the demand itself ... Art is received with an attention invested with an anxiety about distraction: both distraction from the works and the ‘distraction from distraction’ that is attention to the works.⁷

Linking closely back to Benjamin’s notion of ‘reception in distraction’, Osborne’s comments achieve a deeper significance in a time when hyper attention is a normative state of being. The anxiety inherent in viewing art in an institutional context, compounded with a restless mind, necessitates a type of art that recognises these conditions. Contextualising text as an artwork, Prcevich ‘alters the system of reading’⁸ within which the words are interpreted, inciting more thoughtful engagement. While the text works certainly possess connotations outside of an artistic setting – they also echo the language of political campaign slogans or even advertising catchphrases – it is their *situation* in a gallery which lends them a certain gravity. Additionally, Prcevich’s approach differentiates her work from other forms of text we experience in the digital realm (code, hypertext, SMS) that are consumed and dispensed with in an instant. Prcevich makes text material again, reclaiming a selfhood that is firmly grounded in embodiment and the physical world.

Similarly engaging with the embodied experience, **Nancy Constandelia**’s monochromatic paintings provide a captivating entry point to the exhibition, recalling the late-modernist interest in the transformative encounter between painting and viewer. Replicating the notion of ‘contemplative immersion’ (as described by Osborne) linked to abstract expressionist and Colour Field painting, Constandelia’s work encourages the viewer to enter a space of spatio-temporal suspension – and thus a place of sustained, ‘deep’ attention – through her manipulation of colour and deftness of technique. The influence of Rothko, for instance, is certainly recognisable in her paintings, which produce similar effects. In the 1961 catalogue for a major solo show of Rothko’s work at MoMA, curator Peter Selz noted: ‘Seen close up and in a penumbra, as these paintings are meant to be seen, they absorb, they envelop the viewer ... we are meant to enter [the painting], to sink into its atmosphere of mist and light or to draw it around us like a coat—or a skin’.⁹ In this lyrical conception of Colour Field painting, the viewer (or participator) is entirely immersed; viscerally enfolded by a vibrating ‘field’. The painter is concerned with the individual from an experiential point of view, rather than a socio-political one.

Rothko and his contemporaries (Jackson Pollock, Barnett Newman, Willem de Kooning ...), however, have since become associated with a kind of aggressively macho individualism, one that exists in tandem with neoliberal capitalism. The sense of independence and liberation signified by their paintings was co-opted to form the cultural aspect of the United States’ ‘Marshall plan’ of the late 1940s, intended to define itself against Soviet communism. In an article on American Modernism Jonathan Harris explains how the work of such artists was instrumentalised, coming to represent ‘the ‘universal Free Style of the West’’, in which ‘the large agitated canvasses of Jackson Pollock or Rothko’s floating fields of colour became emblems of the freedom of liberal American society: beacons of individualism, unfettered activity and creative risk’¹⁰.

Constandelia posits a return to an apolitical individualism, one that is founded on the bodily interaction between painting and viewer. Her painting *The Blue of Distance iii* (2018), located at the main sightline from the entrance of the gallery, is a dizzying

vision in electric blue. As is typical in her work, Constandelia applies a gradient in her chosen colour, seamlessly transitioning from light to dark. This tonal shift produces an ambiguous pictorial space divorced from representational depiction. It is in this space that the viewer becomes absorbed, perceiving various optical (and affective) impressions based on the selection of colour. The intense brightness of *The Blue of Distance iii* recalls the glare of a computer screen, while *Khora xxiv* and *xxv*, two paintings in dark grey (their titles drawn from the Greek *khōra*, referring to a space or receptacle), have a subtler, more meditative effect. Both, however, produce the enveloping sensation that Selz refers to, permitting a prolonged depth of engagement and attention.

Corporate Massage offers an equally immersive experience, one that is instead characterised by a wry humour and sharp critique of the diminishing divide between the digital and the ‘real’. *Nightcap* (2018), here re-presented as a three-channel video installation, reproduces many of the tropes associated with an increasingly popular subset of YouTube videos, known by the tingling, pleasurable sensation they can supposedly produce – Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response (ASMR). The videos typically involve gentle or tactile sounds, whispering, expressions of care (categorised further under the label of ‘personal attention’ videos), or repetitive tasks.¹¹

Nightcap utilises exaggeration and hyperbole, combining various elements found in ASMR videos to generate an effect that is at once absorbing yet strangely unsettling. In one video, an anonymous body dressed in a white morphsuit and goggles handles a series of water toys. She inflates a pair of children’s ‘floaties’, playing with the mouthpiece in a faintly sexual manner, caresses a large rubber duck, strokes a ‘water wiggly’ (those slippery water-filled plastic tubes that were big in the 90s) and rolls about in an empty inflatable pool, throwing around the brightly coloured plastic balls one would find in a McDonald’s ball pit. These actions produce a series of sounds that can only be described in phonesthetic terms: squishy, squidgy and slimy. In another video, a figure sits in a white nondescript space, tapping their nails against the plinth on which they sit, brushing their hair, popping bubble wrap, spreading slime across their face and rubbing their feet together. In the third, an eerily flawless female avatar utters affirmative phrases in the style of a personal attention ASMR video: ‘I’ve really missed you’, ‘You are so important to me’. After the notional ‘viewer’ selects the option to ‘treat yourself’, the avatar delves into a dreamlike narrative in which ‘Work has been cancelled, skies are blue, and you’re going on an adventure’. It’s a kind of bizarre mindfulness exercise that poses the question: Is artificial intelligence capable of alleviating human maladies? Corporate Massage advances a conception of individualism wherein the human subject becomes purely reliant on AI to remedy her ills.

The experience is intensified with part of the work being viewable from the comfort of an ergonomic massage chair. During the opening event, the work is activated by a performer (and qualified masseuse) in corporate attire (after all, ASMR is an industry, exploited by ‘ASMRtists’ keen to rack up views with a view to acquiring advertising revenue), delivering massages to willing audience members. This arrival at the body via technological means offers an interesting way out of the problem of attention; exploiting the same digital technologies that apparently divert attention to achieve the opposite – complete corporeal immersion.

In his installation *nursery rhymes* (2018), **Finn Marchant** explores the emergence of a particular variety of children’s videos on YouTube, which, like their ASMR counterparts, exist largely to turn a profit through advertising. These take advantage of the attentional vulnerability and passive viewership of young children who are easily lured in by recognisable characters, catchy melodies and bright colours.¹² If one enters ‘surprise eggs’ into YouTube’s search bar, they will receive tens of millions of results; a combination of short and longer form compilation videos usually consisting of a pair of disembodied hands unwrapping a branded chocolate egg (Kinder or otherwise) to reveal a small plastic toy. Drawing on the format of the ‘unboxing’ video, surprise egg videos combine voice-over narration, simulated tactility and the all-important dopamine hit of the final reveal. It’s easy to see the relation here to ASMR, albeit with a consumerist bent; priming children for a future life of fetishistic consumption. Here again is an individualism of the neoliberal-capitalist sort, where useless material goods are glorified, and their pursuit is self-absorbed and antisocial.

Views for these videos are accumulated in a number of ways: YouTube recommendation algorithms soon latch on to what kids are selecting, providing suggestions for similar videos (and if autoplay is enabled a stream of surprise egg videos will play endlessly one after another), titling videos with a series of keywords crammed together to enhance visibility (bizarre titles like ‘SURPRISE EGGS Toys Grinch Paw Patrol Frozen Pikmi Pops Cotton Candy’ or ‘20 Surprise Eggs Unicorn, Peppa Pig, LOL dolls, Chupa Chups toys smushy’, for example), and even more obscure methods; automated bots being programmed to view, comment on and even generate new content.¹³

Countless animated children’s cartoons and nursery rhyme videos on YouTube work in the same way, featuring familiar characters (comic book superheroes, Disney princesses, or characters from cartoon TV programs) often with bizarre plotlines and produced through a weird amalgamation of human and machine intelligence. To appreciate their underlying profit-driven intent, we can understand these videos as working within the ‘attention economy’, a system which posits our attention as a finite resource ready to be monetised – an apparatus largely associated with the in-your-face marketing currently taking over both public and private space. These children’s videos operate more quietly, in the space where parents offload the responsibility of childcare to an iPad for just half an hour of peace and quiet.

Marchant has produced his own animated and surprise egg videos, utilising omission as a device to reveal how they function and the psychological susceptibilities that they play upon. The egg videos feature various pairs of hands rotating, tapping and shaking an egg before finally opening the capsule with an anticipatory ‘crack’, revealing nothing inside. The lack of music, narration and of course, the toy, opposes our expectation of instant gratification. Likewise, Marchant’s animated videos, produced by commissioning different sellers on the freelance service platform fiverr, solely consist of disturbingly absent landscape backgrounds. At any moment, one could image a woodland animal emerging from behind a tree and plunging into a rendition of ‘Johny Johny Yes Papa’ or ‘Finger Family’, two absurdly popular nursery rhymes that appear repeatedly on the YouTube channels that house such videos. *nursery rhymes* demonstrates the vulnerability of our attention to money-grubbing entities, who exploit our human tendency towards reward-motivated behaviour.

The current fear surrounding impaired attention spans due to technological development is largely linked to the fear of decreased productivity. The valuing of maximum output over meaningful experience is an ideological one; bound to the ethics of economic individualism (which is expressed nowadays as neoliberal capitalism) that values competitiveness, self-improvement and progress. Distraction doesn’t always have to be seen in terms of its ‘catastrophic’ impacts on current economic systems. What about its embodied, affective or social effects? How does it make us feel as individuals? Neoliberalism sees these as lesser concerns, and fails to encompass the full scope of human experience. *Un(Divided) Attention* invites us to rethink the existing structures that dictate labour in the 21st century, or at the very least, question our prioritisation of profitability at the expense of all else.

– *Stephanie Berlangieri*

LIST OF WORKS

NANCY CONSTANDELIA
The Blue of Distance iii 2018
acrylic on primed polyester
76 x 56 cm

Khora xxiv 2018
acrylic on primed polyester
50 x 40 cm

Khora xxv 2018
acrylic on primed polyester
50 x 40 cm

All works courtesy the artist and Galerie pompom, Sydney

CORPORATE MASSAGE

Nightcap 2018
three-channel video (looped), massage chair, live performance
dimensions variable

Courtesy the artist

FINN MARCHANT

nursery rhymes (animated backgrounds) 2018
15-channel video (played in random sequence)
dimensions variable

nursery rhymes (surprise egg) 2018
36-channel video (played in random sequence), plastic eggs
dimensions variable

All works courtesy the artist

AMY PRCEVICH

Site as Situation 2017
vinyl adhesive, paper, laminate, wall, people
as participants (both willing and implicit)
dimensions variable

Courtesy the artist

¹¹ Ibid., p. 222

¹² James Bridle, *New Dark Age: Technology, Knowledge and the End of the Future*, Verso, London and New York, 2018, p. 219

¹³ Rob Gallagher, ‘Eliciting Euphoria Online: The Aesthetics of ASMR’, *Video Culture, Film Criticism*, vol. 40, no. 2, June 2016, p. 1

¹⁰ Jonathan Harris, ‘Mark Rothko and the Development of American Modernism 1938-1948’, *Oxford Art Journal*, no. 1, 1988, p. 43

⁹ Peter Selz, *Mark Rothko, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1961*, p. 10

⁸ Email correspondence between the author and artist

⁷ Peter Osborne, ‘Distracted Reception: Time, Art, and Technology’, in Jessica Morgan and Gregor Muir (eds.), *Time Zones: Recent Film and Video*, Tate Publishing, London, 2004