Be? Here? Now?

Dasha Ilina

Dasha Ilina is a Russian techno-critical artist based in Paris, France. Through the employment of low tech and DIY approaches her work highlights the nebulous relationship between our desire to incorporate modern technologies into our daily lives and proposed social imperatives for care of oneself and others. Her practice engages the public in order to facilitate a space for the development of critical thought regarding our modern day relationships, privacy in the digital age, and the reflexive contemporary desire to turn to technology for answers. She is also the co-director of NØ SCHOOL, a summer school that focuses on critical research around the social and environmental impacts of information and communication technologies.

https://dashailina.com
https://noschoolnevers.com

T.C. With the *Center for Technological Pain*[1], you create funny and ironic DIY devices supposed to solve health problems caused by digital overconsumption. Why did you choose this low-tech aesthetic?

D.I. There were a few reasons. One of the main reasons for choosing a low-tech aesthetic was that I wanted the project to be accessible and easily reproducible for anyone who wished to do so. That's also why a part of the project takes the shape of manuals explaining how to reproduce the objects; this idea came to me naturally in the early days of experimenting with different objects, and ever since then I've had a growing urge to produce low-tech works. I think eventually I started realizing that in order to critique technology, for me personally, it didn't make much sense to be constructing complex machines or using expensive tools.

T.C. In some of your web-based works, you seem to implement a very "folkloric" design, bringing the visitor back to the 1990s and the Net-Art movement, reminding of Olia Lialina. Why is that so? Does it come from a desire to fit into a more creative and less standardized web?

D.I. I build all of my websites myself and my programming skills are quite limited, so I think naturally some of the websites end up looking "folkloric", as you say, because I rarely implement anything other than basic HTML and CSS code which was also the case for a lot of websites back in the 1990s-2000s. For the project *Be? Here? Now?* though, it was a conscious choice to use that aesthetic. With that project I was interested in the overlaps that occur between spirituality and technology, and when I started looking through meditation, yoga, coaching, or other spiritual websites, I quickly noticed that a big number of them seemed as if they had not changed their website design since they first created it in the early 00's. When I started noticing this pattern, it became pretty clear to me that my website had to follow those design choices.

T.C. At the Tangible Cloud second work-session, you introduced the project *Be? Here? Now?*.[2] This work highlights the paradox between our desire for hyper-connection (phone always on, fear of missing out, etc.) and our quest for well-being (yoga, mediation, etc.). How do you analyze this double bind?

D.I. I find this duality to be super interesting, and I think we're seeing a "new normal" appear from this overlap of hyper-connection and our quest for well-being. One example, that has been a pretty clear illustration of this to me, is the emergence of yoga YouTubers that invite you to go through the routines with them, one of the most famous examples of this being Yoga with Adriene[3]. Adriene has one phrase she really loves to repeat and it is something along the lines of "Think about how many people are doing this practice around the world at the same time thanks to this video." So, all of a sudden, yoga—which has always focused on physical and mental presence, especially with the practices that focus on meditation—is now a practice that can be shared among many through a computer screen. Unfortunately, this idea of "presence through the digital realm" doesn't stop at online yoga tutorials. As the metaverse is attempting to expand its functionalities and get more people to buy into their technology, this idea persists. As Rob Horning said about the metaverse and the consumer experience it's been promising in his newsletter article entitled Solitary Confinement: "There was lots of talk about 'feeling really present' as though we should all breathe a sigh of relief that presence itself had finally been commodified."[4] There is no escaping tech companies attempting to commodify every bit of the human experience.

T.C. In some ways, *Be? Here? Now?* reminds of those "smartphone boxes"[5], locked to allow "disconnecting", or as their marketing team puts it, to "disconnect on a daily basis to find peace of mind and clarity in a world that is always ON".[6] The market responds to a digital attention crisis with new products, and therefore, new exhortations to consume. Problems created by digital goods should be solved with more marketed goods. What are your views on what seems to be a downward spiral?

D.I. Garnet Hertz has actually created a similar, though maybe a bit more sophisticated, object with which you're able to choose the amount of time you want to spend away from your phone and lock it in a box for that time—there's no way of getting your phone out once it's in there.[7] Of course there will always be marketed or artistic objects that will propose solutions to whatever new device comes out next, but this exists everywhere around us. Think about taking a medication to solve a medical issue and having to take another medication to help with whatever negative side effects the first one caused—this downward spiral is inevitable

for progress, whether it's the kind progress we want or not is a different question when it comes to technology. What I really find absurd is seeing similar hacks for digital serenity being proposed by the tech companies selling us the devices in the first place! My favorite example of this being the Digital Wellbeing Google page.[8] It promotes spending less time on your phone through the various apps that Google Phones now include. Geert Lovink in his book Sad by Design actually talks us through one of the motivations behind these types of services, the motivation having to do with peak data—a concept that took its name from peak oil and, "like peak oil, this is the theoretical point when the maximum rate of data extraction has been attained."[9] Peak data means having so much data about someone that it simply becomes unmanageable and causes the value of extra data to diminish to a zero, "running the risk of polluting profiles in such a way that they disintegrate."[10] I think that there might be other motivations at play as well, such as competing with other products or services that promote themselves as better for the environment or better for your mental health or simply more secure, but it is fun to think that tech companies are sitting with too much data on their hands—racking their brains to try to think of ways to reduce it.

T.C.   Steve Jobs, Elon Musk, Jeff Bezos or Bill Gates are often presented in medias as digital gurus, tech saviours, or similar holy descriptions. What do you think of this religious vocabulary? What does it say about our relation to digital technologies?

**D.I.**   I think the message is pretty clear: technology is replacing God or religion entirely for some. Think of the early Apple days (although this is actually still the case), when people would queue for hours to get the latest iPhone and one of the hot topics of conversation was what you thought of Steve Jobs' keynote. I remember listening to an interview with a researcher on digital spirituality and they pointed out that tech companies are trying to mimic the omniscience of God and his all-seeing eye. With Google managing virtually every corner of our lives, from knowing what we're looking for, where we need to go, to controlling our room temperature or our door lock, there's really nothing left to be private about. And it seems that a lot of people are fine with this, which should be more than alarming. I think we should've seen it coming when Edward Snowden revealed the extent to which the

US government was spying on individuals around the world and a common response was "Let them! I have nothing to hide."

[1] *Center for Technological Pain*, Video, objects, leaflets, installation, 2017-2020. See: https://dashailina.com/work.php

[2] *Be? Here? Now?*, Website, video, installation, 2022. See: https://dashailina.com/work.php

[3] See: https://www.youtube.com/user/yogawithadriene.

[4] *Solitary confinement*, Rob Horning, October 14, 2022. See: https://robhorning.substack.com/p/solitary-confinement

[5] *Disconnect Box* by Hellobook, see: https://www.hellobook.es/disconnectbo html

[6] See: https://hellobook.es/disconnectbox-html

[7] *Phone Safe 2*, Garnet Hertz, 2015. See: http://concept-lab.com/phonesafe2/

[8] *Digital Wellbeing*, Google. See: https://wellbeing.google/

[9] *Sad by Design*, Geert Lovink, 2019. See: https://www.pluto-books.com/9780745339344/sad-by-design/

[10] Ibid.
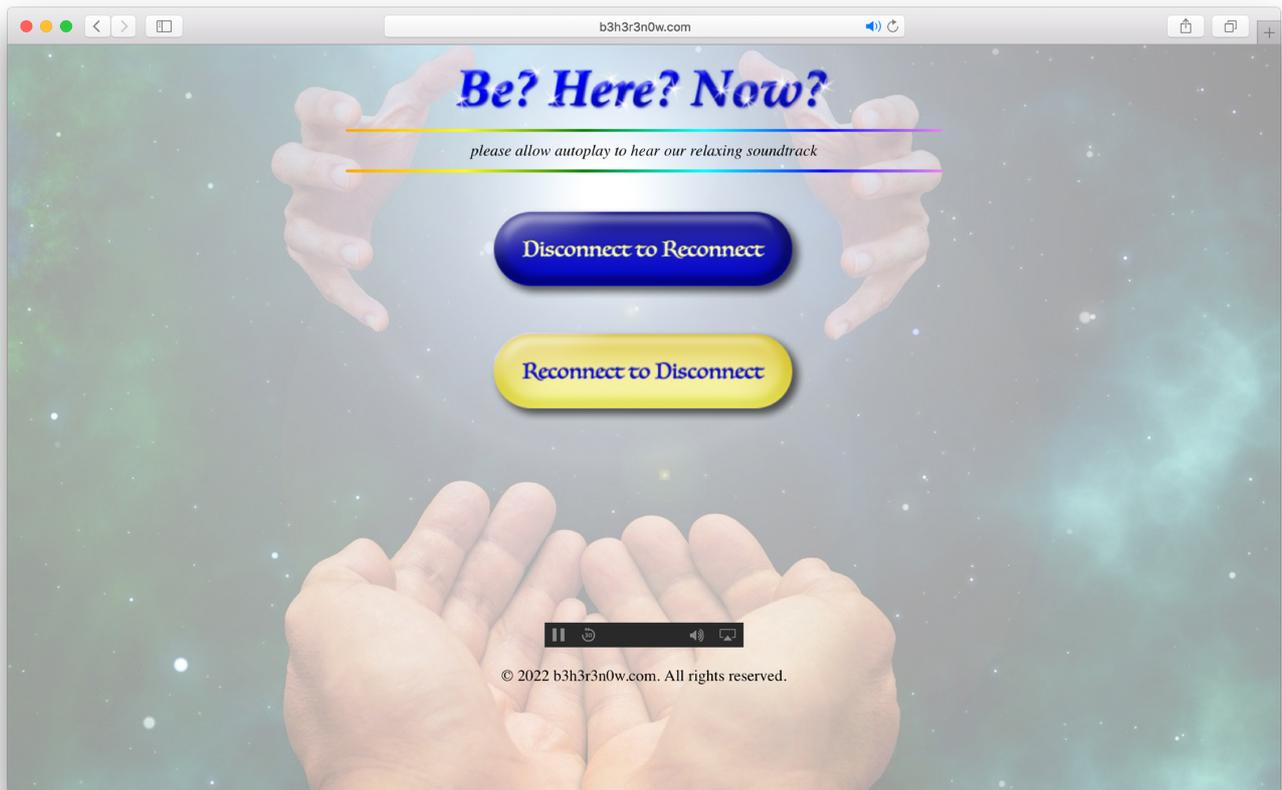
Be? Here? Now?, Web portal screenshot, https://b3h3r3n0w.com, 2022
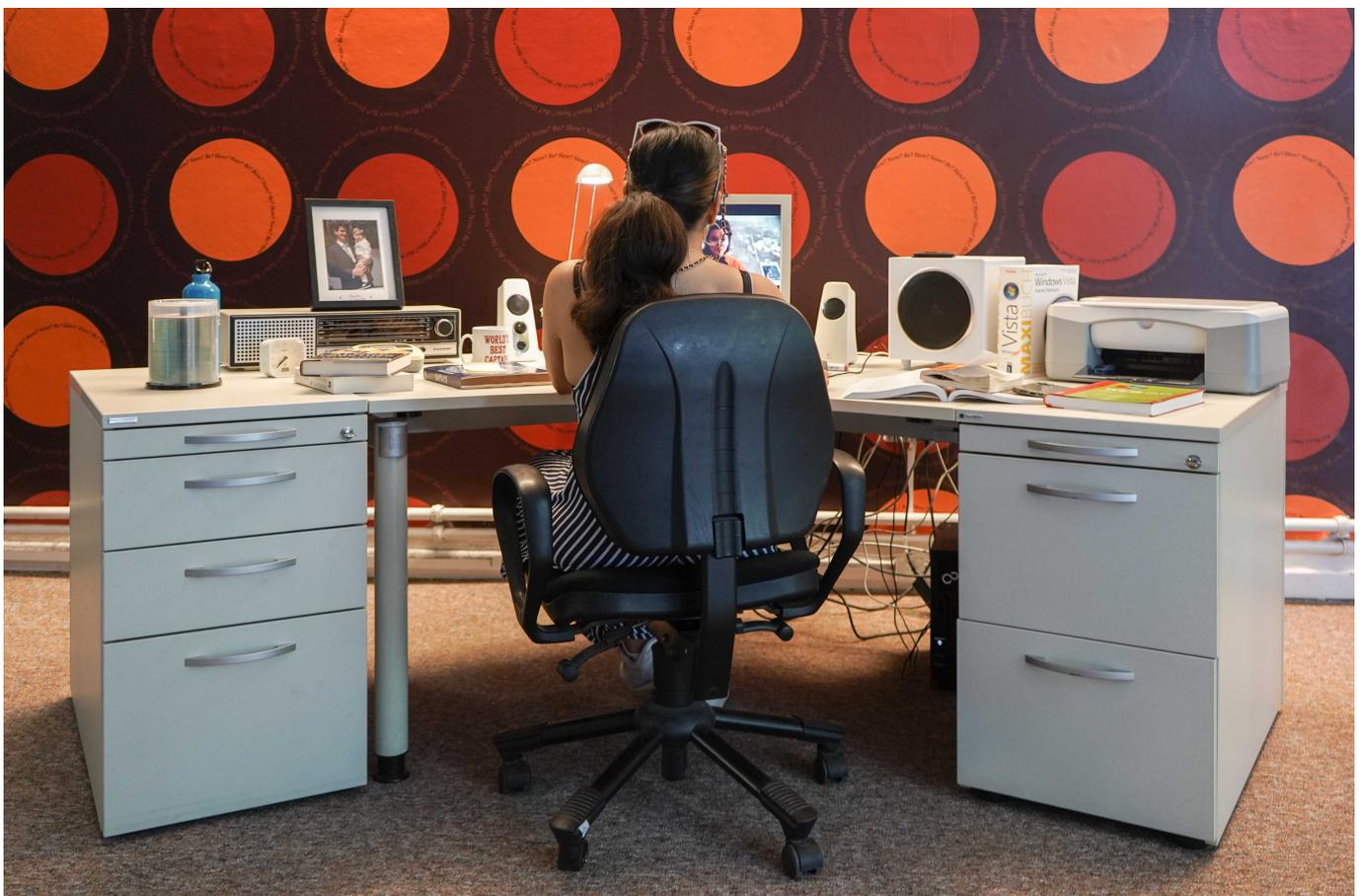
Be? Here? Now?, Installation view, Kampnagel: Hamburg, 2022

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