

Chris Sharp

Relief Fatalism

There is a refreshing, if generous, fatalism about Vadim Fishkin's relationship with technology. This is not to say that it is devoid of redemption – far from it; there can be a great deal of redemption in fatalism, as I intend to show – but that, unlike most art whose medium seems as appropriate to a science experiment as to art, Fishkin's work does not fetishize technology's so-called capacity for salvation. It is beatifically unencumbered by such utopian baggage. Nor is it, properly speaking, dystopian. Beyond the fanatical fervours and fears that attended the evolution and total imbrication of technology into the Western world throughout the twentieth century, Fishkin's preoccupation with it, although clearly of the order of the geek, is much more casual. At once deflating and endearing, his deployment of it can be characterized by a certain sobriety, and even more importantly, a distinct levity. No matter how much faith we invest in its ability to enrich and prolong – not to mention, *illuminate* the mysteries of – our lives, it cannot prevent those lives from ending. Indeed, in some cases, as we are more than well aware, it can but merely hasten them toward their inevitable conclusions.

Or at least this is one way to read *A Speedy Day* (2003). Presented in the Slovenian pavilion for the 51st Venice Biennial in 2005, this installation consists of a room with a window of artificially manipulated light, whose transformation, according to the theory of relativity, simulates the evolution of a twenty-four-hour cycle of light on earth, accelerating and compressing it to 2.5 minutes. This compression can also be the by-product of travelling through space at a velocity slightly less than the speed of light. Not only a simple science experiment, or perhaps better yet, an illustration of a scientific principle, this installation also functions as a stunningly poignant and experientially effective memento mori. Indeed, in this chamber a day could be said to pass by in not much more than the blink of an eye. According to Wikipedia, the average current global lifespan is 67.2 years, which comes out to approximately 24,528 days, which is 588,672 hours; hence, 35,320,320 minutes. Translated into Fishkin's, so to speak, acceleration chamber, this means an entire lifetime can be experienced in 46 days – a breathtakingly bewildering prospect. Here science and technology do the exact opposite of what

we have come to expect them to do: rather than prolong life, they shorten it. And in doing so, if the measure they give for it is not literally accurate (which is impossible), it nevertheless attains a certain symbolic and even psychological accuracy. Which is to say, even though I, at the time of writing this text am thirty-nine years old, if I say that I feel like I was thirty yesterday, it's been about a week since I was eighteen, and barely a month ago since I was ten – you know what I am talking about. All of which is to say that *A Speedy Day* offers the unique opportunity to experience a perfectly incommensurable truth about life.

To perceive this work as deflating, however, would be somewhat misleading. The sense of *vanitas*, and the corresponding urgency I experience before such a testimony to the velocity of my own passage is oddly sobering (although “urgency” is perhaps not exactly the right word: there is nothing desperate about this urgency; if it is marked by anything, it would be a lucidity, a certain pace, even, to contradict myself, a measure). And it is in this sobriety, this ability to engender sobriety, that a certain redemption could be said to begin to take place.

Deflation nevertheless plays a very significant role in Fishkin's relationship with technology. Take *Sisyphus Electronic* (2007), for instance, which looks like it could be a physics experiment; its point, however, is not so much to illustrate gravity but some fundamental, non-scientific principle regarding the vanity of human effort. This slight kinetic sculpture consists of a hair dryer placed mouth up at the bottom of a wooden incline on which a ball ferries back and forth, impelled downward by gravity and back up by the hot air of the hair dryer. What is particularly deflating about this work, however, is the simplicity of its mechanism. It is essentially stupid. And it only becomes stupider the moment you contextualize it within Fishkin's practice, which, as demonstrated by *A Speedy Day*, is no stranger to technological sophistication. For all its stupidity, however, it does the trick, which is to say, it successfully does what it sets out to do: to demonstrate a certain, let's say, Sisyphean principle that could be perceived at the heart of technology.

While these works could be said to be directed toward undermining illusion, a whole other series of works seeks to amplify it, sending it categorically, if poetically, over the top. I am thinking of Fishkin's spotlight-and-shadow works, in which a spotlight is directed at an object and the shadow it throws does not necessarily correspond to that object, or if it does, it only does so in part. Probably the most lyrical example of this would be *miss Christmas* (2012). This sculptural installation is comprised of a can of paint and a digital animation. The animation is

projected against the can in such a way that the can becomes the pot of a palm tree whose leaves languorously rise and fall as if blown by a particularly balmy seaside wind, all of it framed by a spotlight, which invests the work with a distinctly theatrical quality. It is not difficult to imagine this work in some cinematic vignette, in which, say, a house painter, in a fit of reverie, hallucinates his bucket of paint into a swaying palm. Upon first glance, this work could easily be perceived as a form of Marxist critique, but considered beyond that first glance, it becomes clear that such a reading is criminally reductive, for the existential dilemma it describes is altogether more universal and multifaceted than something as single-faceted as class struggle. When all is said and done, this work is as much about illusion as it is about redemption, bringing to mind Wallace Stevens's classic poem "Men Made Out of Words", in which he writes: "Life consists / Of propositions about life. The human / Revery is a solitude, in which / We compose these propositions, torn by dreams, / By the terrible incantations of defeats / And by the fear that dreams and defeats are one." Redemption follows upon the act of imagination, of conceiving a proposition about life, which is ultimately, if not literally then spiritually, indistinguishable from life itself.

The existential pathos lodged deep within what seems to be quite a light work goes directly to the heart of Fishkin's practice in *Lighthouse*, 1996/2011 (if the reader can bear not one, but two puns here). For sheer geekishness, this work is hard to beat, but without the said geekishness to temper it, to take off the edge, the pathos of this piece would be nearly unbearable. Picture it: a mechanism is attached to the artist's heart as a kind of stethoscope, which picks up the signal of his heart and transmits it to the cupola of the Secession building in Vienna, where it bombastically registers as a giant bulb of fluctuating light, glowing and dimming according to the diastolic-systolic cycle of Fishkin's heart. Presented for a full month, this work bears a distinct, if exponentially more bracing, filiation with On Kawara's postcard series *I am still alive*, but on a much more condensed, immediate, and consistent scale and time signature (as if the heart-breaking pathos of Kawara's work were not already poignant enough). I imagine living with this work, seeing it day in and day out for a month, being potentially unnerved and set on edge by its very existence, by the apprehension that would precede seeing it every day during its allotted duration – that I should turn a corner and see it not blinking, somehow switched off, and be suddenly filled with the terrible awareness that the heart to which it was connected is no longer beating. Meanwhile, imagine the relief of seeing it blinking, and

the corresponding knowledge that somewhere there was a man walking around with a black briefcase and a stethoscope attached to his chest, geekishly and, even more importantly, blessedly still alive. (The allegorical dimension of this work should be acknowledged, at least in passing: it issues from the fact that Secession, as is well known, is an institution initially founded in 1897 and run to this day by artists, hence the allegorical nature of Fishkin's intervention.) Indeed, the distance and even incommensurability between *Lighthouse*'s formal presentation and its content, which takes the notion of the memento mori to new extremes, is flagrant and essential to its overall structure. It is precisely this gap, this near-comedic levity, that prevents such a powerful meditation from slipping into a kind of bathos.

Thus Fishkin's relationship with technology is anything but utopian, and yet, it cannot be said to be dystopian either. He clearly perceives within it – and presents us with the potential to gain purchase on – if not the preciousness of the present, then the precariousness that attends our every waking moment, and in some cases even our sleeping moments in life. And therein lies its power and potential of redemption – a redemption, moreover, that is far from prescriptive. But it is given to us, the viewers, like a sheet of blank paper, as *carte blanche*, to do with what we will.

For the publication "Light Matters", 2013, ISBN 978-961-91531-5-4