

ISSUES OF TECHNOLOGICAL DETERMINISM IN THE EMERGENCE OF THE NETIZEN CONDITION

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Abstract: This paper interrogated three selected artworks from the ongoing Pbr research work of Ike Francis Okoronkwo with the aim of establishing the provenance of technological determinism in the netizen subject. The author interpreted iconological and iconographical issues that deal with the citizen's transformation into netizens as technological conditioning of citizens. The work recommends that artists should approach their studio practice from the mindset of researchers to express deeper issues about the society and the need for scholars to expand the interpretation of an artwork beyond the artist's intentions.

Keywords: Citizens, Cultural Determinism, Social Determinism, Technology, Technological Determinism, Netizen

Introduction

New advancements in Information and Communication Technology (ICT) had precipitated multi-social platforms for citizens to use beyond known confines of citizen-hood into emergent citizens of the internet community. Bart Cammaerts and Leo Van Audenhove (2005, p. 179) Identify this emergent shift as 'technological citizenship' which presents multiple modes of engaging reality. The multimodal turn manifests itself in the faddish obsession with the consequences of ICT conditioning through the proliferation of gadgets; new lexicons, memes, and other attitudes that show the undercurrents of the internet influences. Technological citizenship reflects on the migrancy, mobility, and transition of citizens. Individuals simultaneously function both as city dwellers to virtual space navigators, participating in the internet cosmopolite through ICT. Due to the above attribute of being citizens of the internet, Michael and Rhonda Hauben (1997, p.) in a seminal book entitled "Netizens: On the History and Impact of Usenet and the Internet" published in 1997 coined an acronym from citizen and internet to arrive at a new citizen subset called the netizen.

However, netizens are foremost biological entities inhabiting physical spaces. They are primarily citizens of the ascendancy of technological enablement; they inter-mix the analog of digital processes towards the actualization of their dreams and expectations. If we understand the human primarily as citizens, the netizen becomes one that is primarily a citizen; having been born in and operates at certain geographical, ethnic, racial, social and cultural space. A netizen's identity draws on influences which do not obviate its citizen's cultural or geographical experiences, rather, these influences present endless possibilities for engaging emerging cultural dynamics through new logics advanced by knowledge. By establishing the issue of technological determinism influence on the netizen condition, this paper aims to

explicate the aptness of expressive materials from e-waste discards to create visual metaphors of the netizen phenomenon in mixed media works by Ike Francis.

The authors adopt an interpretive approach to expand the reading of the metaphors in 'FaceBook 2', 'Blackmails and Black Boxes' and 'Universal Man' from Ike Francis' ongoing practice-based (PBR) research work to explain the issue of the technological deterministic underpinning of netizen. This engagement, therefore, throws up new challenges which our positions as scholars and practicing artists had prepared us to manage. More so, as Greame Sullivan had observed that "the critical and creative investigations that occur in studios, galleries, on the internet, in community spaces and in other places where artists work, are forms of research grounded in art practice" (Sullivan 2005, p.xi), the studio productions mentioned above make up research subject to engage technological determinism. Being simultaneously artists and scholars, the authors have the advantage of rare perspective to approach the task through the formalized academic rigor of systematic inquiry and practical studio experiences in engaging the subject. The paper engages the netizen phenomenon within the imbrications of technological determinism with a view to situating the citizens' transformation to netizen as a subset of the former state. This also provides an anchor to understand other artistic works from Ike Francis ensue from citizens' transformation to netizens.

Background to the Study

This paper interrogated the netizen phenomenon as a technologically determined condition which had expanded the scope and functions of citizenship to the internet space. Though it is argued that both social and technological factors influence the experience of netizen, we focus attention to interrogating the technological factor in this study. This becomes pertinent to show the connection between deriving resource materials from ICT wastes in creating mixed media and installation artworks by Ike Francis and its reading as visual metaphors of the netizen condition. In lieu of this task, the authors select three artworks which adopt the mixed media and installation art mode of display for analysis. The works are; 'Geekscape, Facebook2 and the Universal Man. All the artworks mentioned above were created from repurposed e-waste materials and express ideas that cover both interpersonal and social factors of the netizen. Establishing the technological deterministic aspect of netizen becomes a visual explication of Marshal McLuhan's statement that "medium is the message" presented in his work "Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man" in 1964.

For instance, McLuhan uses an example from the electric bulb in an instance and the railway in another to explain the difference between the impact of something and the purpose of its use. The medium of light in electrical power which establishes the message, in this sense the message of electric bulb is to mediate between daylight and nighttime by chasing away darkness and the many activities which this enables

human association at any time and place. By extension, the message in using e-waste materials for creating art explores the medium of ICT and the psychic and social changes it has brought among humans and their changing status as citizens. McLuhan writes that the message of any medium or technology is “the change of scale or pace or pattern that it introduces into human affairs (McLuhan 1964: p. 203). Using the three works mentioned above explicates the material components of extending our human bodies as citizens into the virtual space and condensation of time through the internet (technology) for creating new social activities.

Using effects from ICT waste is an uncanny strategy by the artist (Ike Francis) to exploring the theme of technological determinism in his doctoral studies on using the practice-based research method to approach the subject of netizen, the works under review materialize the concept of “the medium is the message”. This approach calls to attention to some unanticipated consequences of the ICT and its materiality to expanding the meaning of media. For the artist, the academic discipline and the public, e-waste materials function as secondary or tertiary effects in a flow of ICT meaning in contemporary society. Mark Federman notes that these dynamic processes are establishing grounds which work “silently to influence the way in which we interact with one another, and with our society at large.” (Federman 2004).

Interrogating Universal Man, FaceBook 2 and Blank Mails and Black Boxes



Fig. 1 Fig. 1a View of cluster of Circuit Panels Ready to be used in Studio work. Source: Okoronkwo Ikechukwu Francis. Port Harcourt 2013.

Universal Man



Fig. 2 Universal Man. 2013, 183CM X 244cm. Mixed Media/ Painting

Universal Man comprises of four canvas panels arranged in two-row and two columns to form a square shape. Each canvas panel has assemblages of maps from several cities of the world such as Abuja, Port-Harcourt, Lagos, Kano, Cape Town, New York and Dakar. Pasting of names of towns and cities were randomly placed from print stick-ups irrespective of the geographical proximity or cultural affinity. A double image of a man with arms and legs spread across the four panels and superimposed on the other. What becomes visible looks like a man with eight limbs.

The concept of the man in the painting is derived from Leonardo da Vinci's drawing of 'Homo Vitruvanus'. This figure of a man was executed through stencil and daubs of names of cities in multiple layering that the texts from a particular name city weaves into others and makes decipherability of specific city names difficult. All that appear before a viewer is a flurry of texts that build up into human form that spreads on maps and refer to no specific place. Yet these contain the direction to existing places with street names and exact directions. In our new realities with internet, the human is now a carrier of the geography of his/her world and this depends on the gadgets we carry.

Leonardo da Vinci, had the issue of human navigation of the world at heart when he used the image of a known architect to show human's quest to conquer spaces far and near. This thinking still subsists in our contemporary time with the advances of the internet and social media. The piece interrogated boundlessness as a form through the position of the man and what it symbolizes. Material determinism further plays a role in the sense that maps, road signs, and city names are technological devices used in locating or identifying places.



‘Face Book #2’ 2014. 186cm X 186cm. Mixed Media On Board/Painting

Facebook #2 is a large mixed media painting on four angles shaped and one square-shaped board supports, all put together amounts to five panels. The angle panels are arranged in a continuous sequence which encloses the square panel thereby forming an overall square shape. On the board are assortments of materials ranging from used keyboard pads, discarded radio and computer motherboards, extended plastics and constructed alphabets from wood. On the angle-shaped panels were arranged the above-named materials which were all painted in metallic silver color. Structurally, the four angles panels frame an inner square panel of 24inches 24x inches. This inner panel has canvas support and painted with acrylic color which creates two section of the painting. An outer mixed media on board that frames an inner acrylic on canvas painting.

‘Facebook #2’ presents the two pages of social media engagement before the onlooker without any agenda at preempting the viewer’s choice and therefore allows the viewer to decide on the best of the two pages to focus his or her energies. The multiple panel display shows form and essence as representing humanity and technology which typifies the popular social media platform called Facebook . From outer frames of the painting are sections that represent the virtual space executed from ICT interiors. This space has metallic colors of silver and suggests the machine-like aesthetics that technology saturation evokes to human sensibility. Use of chromatic colors was totally de-emphasized thereby projecting the three-dimensional and tactile quality of the painting as a reminder of machine determined reality. This is used to frame an inner section divided into four sections with a human face in each section positioned perpendicularly at the base of an existing form. The effect suggests continuity as one section flows into the other while retaining its color dominance.

Analyzing this work will surely throw up the deterministic debates. In the transition of human citizens to ICT Netizens, technological culture seems to take the front burners of inter-human and cultural exchanges. Despite that the human agency is behind any technological advancement, netizen attitudes tend to prefer the online engagement to direct inter-personal relationship. Just as the metallic section with relics from ICT discards points to technological reality, the human faces placed at right angles to other faces suggest interconnections occasioned by the social media platforms.

Black Mails and Black Boxes



Fig. 3 Black Mails and Black Boxes. 2014. Variable Installation of 74cm X 74cm Space With Three Panels Of 62cm X 62cm Each And Nine Boxes. Installation Art/Sculpture

‘Of Blackmails and Black Boxes’ is a variable installation piece which comprises of three wooden panels of 62cm x 62cm each and nine hanging black boxes of different sizes each. On the panels are arrangements of charcoal, alphabets from extended plastics and constructed woods, circuit panels and recovered materials from waste. The three panels are hung along each other to form a three panel (triptych) display pattern, beneath these triptych display are nine boxes made from predominantly charcoal and partly extended plastics suspended through a transparent and invisible fish string from each panel.

The use of black and materials are symbolic of the work’s focus on some hidden and covert misappropriation of the internet platforms by miscreants who seize the opportunity of the gaps between online and offline personalities to swindle unsuspecting victims. The work explores the hidden spectacles of the internet world where some humans and their innate desires towards evil are hidden under the visage of social media attractive texts and proposals to swindle the public. The work adopts the ludic postmodern form by letting the understanding of the work make sense as problematic of representations in the topics of social, material determinism and the netizen condition.

The overall use of black colors on texts and discards from ICT simulates burnt up remains of a valued item, this is because of the pervading blackness and charcoals that leaves only a few hints on the materiality of the ICT interiors. The blackness references the shady business that some netizens undertake under the cover of the internet platforms. Crooks and swindlers see cyber-crime as a short-cut to the

drudgery of the process by using the internet platform to test their dexterity in conning others through scam emails. 'Black Mails' play on the meaning of words and things related to end. The work presents two views of an aerial view of a city under the cover of darkness and the power of text in serving both good and bad ends. This also is a metaphor of the city where citizens live. The more urbanized the city becomes, the more life is precarious for the survival of the masses and yet the city must attract all and sundry. Some technologically constituted citizens using the internet platforms try to detach themselves from the vanquished hopes of the harsh realities of real-time cities. In the same way, crooks and swindlers had turned the real city into a hotbed of criminal activities, the cyberspace has become dangerous zones like Jonathan Raban's soft city where death is only a whisker away (Raban, 1980 p. 22).

The emergence of the black mail activity is part of the unintended aspect of the netizen which if not sensitize will divert the dreamt purposes of citizens transformation to netizens into a nightmare of an experience.

Justifying E-Waste Metaphors in Selected Artworks by Ike Francis from the Paradigm of Technological Determinism

Some crucial questions that need clarifications as a way of couching this topic arise as to who is a citizen? What is technology? What constitutes determinism? If netizen is a determined state, what forms of determinism is involved and where do we focus our study on? Other important issues arise as to what extent does it influence contemporary citizens? These questions give an explanation to the artworks even without indebt analysis by the authors.

The concept of citizenship had always been a contested notion among scholars and concerned organizations. Considering its early use to refer to status of individuals in given sovereign spaces covered by custom or law, the idea of citizenship becomes physically and geographically located within space. The fact of being a citizen of a place attracts its rights, privileges, obligations, and responsibilities. Currently, traditional expressions of citizenship are being challenged by new realities occasioned through ICT. Experiencing these movements, Bart Cammaerts and Leo Van Audenhove (2005) discourses the emergent shift which manifests as an alternative experience of citizenship with the extension of nation states and rights. They observed that "in technologically mediated discourses of citizenship, new kinds of political, social, economic and cultural forms of belonging are discussed because from infancy new generation had grown up with electronic toys and games" (Cammaerts and Audenhove. 2005, p. 179.)

The state of citizenship binds people by laws and regulations within defined space, which includes the civic appurtenances of humans under constituted political authority. Civil, political, social and other cultural influences of the citizens are reprocessed into new reality through a plethora of gadgetries and platforms used in the internet platform engender navigational boundlessness of the netizens. Under

technological conditioning, citizens re-prioritize right of access and participation at the cyberspace which extends their influence beyond physical and geographical boundaries. By extension, netizens are citizens (having been born in and operates from certain geographical, ethnic, racial, social and cultural space), who works in the virtual space of the internet. From its inaugural presentation, the concept of netizen had opened new vistas for researchers in the social sciences and other related disciplines of scholarship on new transformations occurring in the subject citizenship.

The emergence of ICT is now interfacing with the citizen's physical status and given rise to multimodal platforms where citizens participate through ICT hence erstwhile citizens functioning as netizens exist within the recognition and legitimization of a technologically conditioned public and communities. Technological citizenship had been identified in 1995 as 'netizen' by Michael Hauben. This merges civil, political and social rights through its plethora of gadgetries. Through this, netizens re-prioritizes rights of access and participation of people within a 'technological common-wealth' called the cyber-space. Under the above condition, a netizen could belong to racial, sexual, religious, cultural, political, professional or any other groups. These constitute multiple identities that culminate into a netizen's multimodal participation within the internet cosmopolite.

On the other hand, Technology deals with application of tools and systems within human societies. The need for technology arises as a result of want to improvise handles for a better engagement of nature's unending demands. "Humans in their dynamic engagement with culture adapt their needs to nature's scarce resources while attempting to fashion tools and means for easier navigations of its vagaries (Okoronkwo 2014, p. 58). "Technology derives its ontology from the Greek word *Tekhne*, which refers to skill." (Okoronkwo 2014, 53). By extension, it refers to systems that humans have devised to solve nature's unending demands that the history of technology surely conveys the cumulative account of human systematic control over nature. Technology is easily understood by considering the situation of a man who, due to gaps between him and a mango fruit he wants to pluck from a tall mango tree, fashions a long pole with an anchor so that he can effectively bring the fruits down from its heights. The thought of devising a pole may fall within science or philosophy but the real pole, the system of plucking, and its application belong to technology.

In the above instance, a need to pluck the fruit which is beyond the human reach determines the shape, length, and design of the plucking tool while the tool can also influence the human brain and reactions to its shape. Under the information age, humans adapt to ICT materials as a means going beyond their limitations as citizens. The internet as a cultural tool has both technological and social implications and arose out of the need to mediate human needs for cultural navigation to which computer and other ICT gadgets provide material support to.

In this context, technological aspect of ICT produces a barrage of waste materials from used products of the internet platforms which can instigate further explorations into the subject.

A justification of focusing on technological determinism suffices by analyzing the works through privileging the materiality of ICT gadgets that artists can find physical materials for creative repurposing in the studio environment. The social aspect is more fluid, intangible and can inspire creative responses but not acquire body as an artistic medium for studio engagement – thus is the major reason for focusing on material determinism of technology in interpreting the artworks and the citizens' context as a plastic evocation of the concept behind "the medium is the message".

To acknowledge the existence of culture is a tacit acceptance of a systematic progression of events within the lived society, and this is determinism. Whether this is hinged on material culture, technological developments, individual introspection, economy, biology, society, environment or any other condition does not obviate the fact that an existing influence affects choice or decision of present actions. This is determinism– a belief that there is an overriding causal law which makes things to become through cause and effect ordering.

Conclusion

Having hinted earlier that netizen are biological humans who engage their world through ICT media as citizens of the internet, these citizens of the internet live within the ascendancy of the information age through electronic enablement. The above concept had also been observed in the paper and elsewhere as netizen, this concept presents an important issue of debate on determinism and free will. The foregrounds of determinism in netizen condition through selected mixed media paintings, by Francis, show through visual metaphors the social and technological determinism underpinnings of technological citizenship. A simple line of argument pursued by the authors is that, if nature approximates the pre-existing, pre-determined world and culture is the human intervention to nature's inadequacies. Therefore, human conditioning by internet is technological in so far technology refers to tools made by humans to adapt to nature's insufficiencies.

The three works analyzed in this paper focused on three different aspects of the netizen and internet phenomena viz; (a) 'The Universal Man' focused on human quest to conquer space and time through technology. The technology conversely is changing humans into netizen, a sort of post-human experience. (b) 'Facebook #2' explored emerging relationships where netizens are drifting into post-human conditions while de-emphasizing their human aspect of real-time, physical engagement and (c) 'Blackmails and Black Boxes', focused on the cryptic aspect of the technological conditioning of physical citizens into netizens. From the three paintings analyzed, we have showed the different aspects of technological conditioning of

citizens to exert boundlessness, limitlessness and actualize the anticipated and unanticipated dreams of ICT.

Through the paper, the authors (re)presented the mixed media paintings through focusing on the implicit and salient themes of technological determinism expressed in the paintings. The paper recommends that artists should take a deeper look into contemporary issues in their societies and to evolve new ways of expressing mundane events in order to sensitize the public on its involvement with thing within their societies.

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