

## An Exhibition Showcasing the Dark Side of Technological Revolution

By SHANA NYS DAMBROT, JUNE 2016

James Georgopoulos: The Earth Is Flat

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James Georgopoulos has an intriguing way of tackling complex social dynamics in his cross-platform artworks, simultaneously both aggressively head-on in both manifesto and monumentality, and through poetically layered, intimately rhetorical allegory — often within the self-same object. On the one hand, in his direct appropriation of the actual materials and objects related to his messaging (gold-plate, automobiles, robotics, slot machines, surveillance photos, Pop and porn imagery, journalistic economic metrics) he is adept at using the actual artifacts of our tech-driven consumerism and bottomless acquisitiveness in his deconstructions of the impulses they enable. There's almost a Duchampian quality to the way he preserves the formal and functional integrity of deracinated “found” objects, even as Georgopoulos's eloquent transformations thereof into paradoxical sites of historical nuance generate experiential encounters that engender skeptical, subversive critiques about society's foibles.

In previous iterations, excessive wealth, limitless materialist desire, and colossal ego-based ambition have come under his scrutiny. For “The Earth is Flat” he shifts his focus to the related sphere of the rise of Artificial Intelligence and insidious surveillance mechanisms as representations of the dark side of the technological revolution. This ontological framework is partly about the shifting landscape of jobs and the value of human labor, but more broadly still, it's about our perplexing and counterintuitive willingness to cede control and privacy to our robot overlords in the name of convenience, luxury, and desire.

The sculptural centerpiece of the show is “Autonomous X12” — the chassis of a prototype of a driverless car. There was a car chassis in his previous show — a finely painted wreckage of a luxury automobile which critiqued the car-fetish culture. This time, the steel skeleton is outfitted with dozens of cameras and a video screen which illustrates the millions of data points gathered by the car's “brain” as it observes and learns about its environment. On the one hand, it's a marvel of digital tech, fascinating to behold as an externalization of how a computer “sees” the world around it. On the other, it's an engagingly visceral reminder that those data points can be stored and tracked in great detail. In an adjoining room, a monolithic black box called “Zeus” hums and beats like a human heart as it goes about the business of doing exactly that sort of data collection. Where “Autonomous X12” is still somewhat magical to behold, “Zeus” is an ominous reminder of the the scale of such an operation, and the paranoia-inducing realization that “they” know everything.

“Human Behavior” is a suite of found black and white surveillance photos from probably the late 1970s' of which little or nothing is known about the photographer, arranged in a sprawling configuration based on the patterns of primitive motherboards or the weirdly analog data punch-cards that ran early computers. (There are works elsewhere in the show based on those kinds of cards.) This presentation of a nearly-charming, partially creepy, individual program of proto-surveillance from an analog age, lends perspective to the subject at hand. People have always watched each other, with or without their permission, and with or without the aid of digital tracking technology. But now, machines are doing the watching — and they are doing it with our thoughtless consent, and the stakes are a lot higher than they used to be.

Back in the main room, a robotic machine called “Luddite” is both a relic and a warning. In fact, it’s the factory robot that built the car across the room, transported at great expense from its distant home. Speaking to the tipping point at which robots cease being the servants of man and instead become his usurper, this charismatically anthropomorphic creature is both a maker/creator and a designed/built object. In its inception and deployment it has been arguably removed from aesthetic considerations, yet in its new context it is presented, confronted, as a post-industrial sculpture with all the attendant art historical paradigms in play. Like “Zeus” it is an unexpected reminder that all this digital, cloud-based living still operates on a very physical, embodied foundation. To that point, the gallery installation alone required some 7,000 feet or more of hefty fiber-optic cable to operate. The extrapolated exponential math from that logistical statistic to global implications is truly unimaginable to the human mind, but the point is indelible.

None of this will stop anyone from letting the wired-up vintage refrigerator cameras in “Weight Watcher” take their picture in a charming selfie-feedback loop, without asking who is watching, or where the pictures are going. They’ll just tag themselves on Instagram anyway — because, as Georgopoulos enjoys pointing out, this perilous state of things is something to which we have all too blithely already consented. WM