Don't Panic – An essay by Natalie D Kane

The gallery is lined in aluminium foil, transforming it into an enclosure known as a Faraday Cage, designed to shield us from phone, wifi and other electromagnetic signals. It is an experiment in freezing the audience in time, suspending our animation while we try to realign ourselves with the many possibilities that the Millennium threw at us.

In the first half of Duncan Poulton and Nick Smith's film *Y2K*, as we re-live the build up to the Millenium, it's hard not imagine how things might have been different. The world was hurtling towards global technological uncertainty, making bets on systems that had rapidly outgrown our comprehension. The computer was suddenly less of a sparkling innovation we'd learn about on technology entertainment shows like the BBC's *Tomorrow's World* (1965–2003), but had quickly become something to be feared. On the eve of the Millennium, *Tomorrow's World* had a regular 'BUG WATCH', reporting the first places for the phenomena to hit across the globe, with two nuclear reactors in Japan reported as the first to be hit by the anomaly, a monstrously large beetle crawling across a globe in the background. The Millennium was a moment of collective preparations, the leaving of messages and assurances, "The End of the World as We Know It", as it was known.

New Year's Eve 1999 was a day filled by a feeling of apocalyptic fervour, all stoked by a moment of collective technological anxiety not seen since the height of the Cold War. In a paper published days before the Millennium by professor of security engineering Ross Anderson entitled 'The Millennium Bug – Reasons Not to Panic'[1], Anderson writes after paragraphs of reasons for his scepticism around societal collapse; "Nonetheless, the possibility of the Millennium Bug causing chaos and civil unrest was a factor in my decision, in 1996, to buy a secluded house in the country with a wood fired stove and a well". Even those who had spent years explaining and rationalising against the scaremongering of world media were still making a bet against oblivion. At the midway point of Poulton and Smith's film we are released, saved supposedly from disaster. The world is still here as the clock strikes midnight, and the experts were right or wrong, depending on how you looked at things. A sense of relief, and, perhaps, complacency settled on the world, as it slept into a new era.

In present times, we are drawn into a state of promise and technological fear, as we were 23 years ago, a symmetry pulled into focus by Poulton and Smith's film. However in the anticipation of artificial intelligence there is no superbug or

Installation view of Duncan Poulton's solo exhibition 'Imagine What We Can Do Tomorrow' at Division of Labour, Salford, including *Y2K* (2023) a video work made in collaboration between Duncan Poulton & Nick Smith. Photo by Rob Battersby, 2023

clock to set back time. We are in a constellation of moving speculative futures that present themselves as technological certainties. In 2019, as hype was building, a survey in a report by MMC Ventures[2] found that two thirds of AI Startups had no 'AI' in them at all – the industry was willing a dream into being, an imaginary landscape for them to step into once the conditions were right. In this evolving speculation, imagining any collapse brought about by artificial intelligence sometimes feels less like a crash however, than a freefall. Where the year 2000 presented a singular unifying moment of destruction or salvation, we now find ourselves in much more diffuse, confusing and gradual circumstances – an underlying nervous hum of uncertainty.

As a society that has matured with technology, we are overwhelmed by the images that feed artificial intelligence technologies and the images that are produced by them, an Ouroboros* of visual culture that makes it difficult to know when everything started. As generative artificial intelligence processes such as Midjourney and Stable Diffusion show us images that can capture all of our fears of machinic creation – like 2023's AI-generated photograph winning the Sony World photography prize[3] – it is where we don't see intervention or the creep of these visual disturbances that perhaps show where we should be trying to disrupt.

In contrast, Poulton's collages come as a result of a *personal* algorithm, a meticulous and eclectic process of collecting, a marriage of human and machinic methods. The works in this show introduce personal images from Poulton's family photo albums from the years 1999 and 2000, obscured, redacted and melted in with found material created by others. We forget that in the archives of ImageNet – the wildly flawed image database released in 2009 by Dr FeiFei Li that trained so much of our neural networks* – were personal photos too, because how else would a machine know what a family is supposed to look like?[4] Within the archives of systems are unknown connections, but in Poulton's case this constellation of unconscious information gathering creates a problem for any machine if it were to try and interpret it – there are many women in this image, but which one means something to the artist? At which birthday party was this taken? What does that diagram diagnose? Poulton's oscillation between the deeply personal and the completely arbitrary, his compression of time and meaning, are the exercise of an individual who is attempting to live within a world constantly renewed by images amid the 'photographic surplus', as he calls it. Poulton describes this process to me as 'drifting', comparing himself to a search engine wandering a sea of images which themselves have already been filtered through countless technical systems.

Duncan Poulton, *What's the point of getting old?* (2023), digital collage print on archival paper, 1189 x 841mm. Photo by Rob Battersby

All images undergo manipulation as a result of their production, but we are so used to not knowing what is a computationally manipulated image, we no longer seem to care, or feel unable to. In the multi-layered construction of his collaged works, Poulton gives a clue to this sleight of hand, drawing attention to their artifice. We are mediated by images – to pull from Vilem Flusser on photography – we need images to make the world more comprehensible to us, more immediately accessible.[5] It's as if each of Poulton's collages is a personal CAPTCHA*, enabling him to learn about his psyche through what he consumes. They offer a way to gradually decode his reality among this visual noise, through an excavation and re-threading of the user-generated histories and long-forgotten uploads that litter cyberspace.

To me, *Imagine What We Can Do Tomorrow* is an exhibition about anxiety, from the emergency blanket-lined walls to the ways in which Poulton tries to sift through the visual ephemera of a generation promised so much at the turn of the Millennium in his film with Smith. The show exposes our anxiety about the things we used to feel excited about (the future, being young, technology), the anxiety of what we've left behind in the wake of emerging technologies, and how we experience anxiety as a society through media and privately. The exhibition brings into view the emergency broadcast of information that is collectively felt at times such as the Millennium, both at the time of its arrival and the retrospective analysis we compact together through history. We don't get to see or feel these moments unmediated, in parallel with everyone else's; we don't get to see the whole system working at once, it's not designed that way. We only see it when it breaks.

For many of us, we can only experience the hopes and anticipation of an event such as the Millennium again through the lens of nostalgia, through clips on YouTube, or from the countless articles that talk about its failures (we aren't that good at celebrating successes). It feels fitting that the title of the exhibition is the slogan from the much pitied, yet ultimately disappointing Millennium Dome. In 2022, when Storm Eunice tore through London, a generation renewed its nostalgia as it watched as the Dome's roof was shredded apart, and although now rebranded entirely, multiple news outlets fully grabbed the building's history in reporting the damage. Suddenly a chorus of social media posts mourned what felt like the last stand of an arguably shoddy job, with its own architect Richard Rogers calling it cheap, "the same price per square metre as a supermarket shed".[6]

Duncan Poulton, *Sleep Today* (2023), digital collage print on archival paper, 841 x 1189mm. Photo by Rob Battersby

Duncan Poulton, *Splendid Trading* (2023), digital collage print on archival paper, 841 x 1189mm. Photo by Rob Battersby

When I saw the first images of the gallery install, I immediately thought of Andy Warhol's The Silver Factory which was lined with aluminium by Billy Name in the 1960's.[7] Warhol was an artist obsessed by broadcast and fame, but his obsession with silver was future-facing, looking outwards towards NASA spacemen taking their first steps in front of millions and the collective spectacle that this moment held for the nation. But as Warhol explained in his own memoir about The Factory, mirrors were once backed in silver, a lucid reflection of ourselves and how we are presented to the world. In Poulton's exhibition, perhaps we have a brief moment to think about how we've come to live in a time where the edges are not so distinct anymore, where it's harder to see where the machine is or perhaps might not have been.

Installation view of Duncan Poulton's solo exhibition 'Imagine What We Can Do Tomorrow' at Division of Labour, Salford, including *Y2K* (2023) a video work made in collaboration between Duncan Poulton & Nick Smith. Photo by Rob Battersby, 2023

References

1. 'The Millennium Bug: Reasons Not to Panic', Ross Anderson (1999)
2. 'The State of AI 2019: Divergence', David Kelnar, MMC Ventures (2019)
3. 'Photographer admits prize-winning image was AI-generated', Jamie Grierson, The Guardian (2023)
4. 'Where Did ImageNet Come From?', FeiFei Lei, Unthinking Photography (2019)
5. 'Towards a Philosophy of Photography', Vilém Flusser, Reaktion Books (1984)
6. 'How We Made The Millennium Dome', Oliver Wainwright, The Guardian (2015)
7. 'Popism: the Warhol Sixties', Andy Warhol and Pat Hackett, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich (1980)

Glossary

* **Ouroboros** – a circular symbol depicting a snake, or less commonly a dragon, swallowing its tail, as an emblem of wholeness or infinity.
* **Neural network** – a computer system modelled on the human brain and nervous system.
* **CAPTCHA** – a computer program or system intended to distinguish human from machine input, typically as a way of thwarting spam and automated extraction of data from websites.

Info

Duncan Poulton is an artist based between London and Brighton. His practice is fed by an obsessive gathering of online content into a vast digital archive, which he recombines into still and moving image collages. His works address a visual culture of overabundance and ambivalence, exploring the compression of histories and meaning engendered by the internet. Recent solo and two-person exhibitions include Fabrica, Brighton; Outernet, SET Lewisham and TACO!, London. His work has been featured on WeTransfer, WePresent and in Elephant Magazine.
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Nick Smith is artist based in London. His practice explores the complicated relationship between class, politics, histories and the built environment through moving and still image making. Working predominantly from an archive created from his photographs, videos and visual research collated working both as an artist and property inspector. Recent solo exhibitions include OUTPOST, Norwich; OUTPUT gallery, Liverpool; Harlow Museum, Essex; Photofusion, London; and Concord Space, LA.
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