

AutonomotormenTECH; CHECK IF

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This piece of video art concerns the immanent death that surrounds us in everyday life, especially in the current state of exception (Agamben 1999) in which capitalism produces profits off the indistinction between life and death. As the living dead and as the dead living, we have come to embody the biopolitics of zombie capitalism (Lewis and Kahn 2010). At the same time, we surround ourselves with various distractions to try to hold onto the illusion of life. The appropriation of a dark, algorithmic infrastructure produces the illusion of life out of death in the form of biometric measurements that calculate how “alive” we are or how to optimize the work of living. In this sense, biometrics are a symptom of an underlying crisis in life itself, life that can no longer tell if it is living. Biometrics thus could only make sense against a background of zombie existence in which life has become indistinct from death. Biometric devices are cruelly optimistic (Berlant 2011), cultivating a passionate attachment to a “life” that is killing us (softly) through repetitive and meaningless “busyness.”

In such an extreme state, the only response to the impasse between life and death is a darkly comical one, in which the failure to create distinctions becomes an opportunity to reflect on what remains of gestures now freed from either the productivity of instrumentalized life or the pure inertia of death. In this state, the gesture escapes its ends and is released to become a new kind of absurdist infrastructure of its own.

AutonomotormenTECH’s mobile app, called CHECK IF, is a fictitious product of the fictitious company AutonomotormenTECH, created by Elnaz Salehi, and is one such darkly comical intervention into the current state of indistinction. Salehi presents us with an app designed to remind us that we are, despite evidence to the contrary, living every time by checking ourselves into the CHECK IF app. Unlike biometric readings, CHECK IF does not provide reassurance so much as continual torment by this product, further amplifying the feeling that the technologies designed to keep us alive are actually in the service of our untimely demise.

Yet far from nihilistic, CHECK IF *as a work of art* produces what might be the last “evidence” of life: the ability to laugh at the absurdity of zombification itself. The zombie cannot laugh. To laugh is to live. Indeed, it might be the last refuge of the living—the last verification of life as it escapes from capture. Unlike the dull, listless, affectless zombie gestures that are performed in Salehi’s video, laughter is innervating and enlivening. It offers a homeopathic cure for the malaise of zombie existence. Rather than a mere measurement of life’s feeble pulse, CHECK IF rejuvenates, jumpstarting a spark of life out of the darkness. Interestingly, the laughing body is an inoperative body, one that does not perform its tasks and is largely inefficient. Instead of regulating itself (according to biometric statistics), the laughing body convulses with uncontrolled gestures that speak to life that prefers not to be measured (thank you very much!). Salehi confirms Lauren Berlant’s hypothesis that existing in an impasse demands an aesthetic experiment with “the absurdities of neosituationist tragicomedy” (2011, 239).

As one watches Salehi’s video, one is at first left feeling as dejected as the persona appears to be (muddling along in a confused, bewildered, dejected state), and then the reverse happens: one cannot help but laugh at the (anti)spectacle of living death/dying life. Of course, CHECK IF the artwork is far from hilarious. But this is beside the point. Even the emergence of a chuckle indicates the ticklish nature of life that still remains in defiance of zombification.

In this sense, CHECK IF only works if it remains a pataphysical work of art rather than an actual app. As a pataphysical object, CHECK IF offers an “impossible solution” (Jarry 1996) that is not really a solution at all so much as a provocation pushing the imagination to the very limits of logical and pragmatic thinking (encountering the absurdities of the tragicomic). Salehi’s intervention thus proves that art can offer an escape hatch from zombification through a pataphysical experiment that turns the darkness of infrastructure into the unbearable lightness of (dark) comedy.



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