Figure 96 Tribute in Light designed by The Municipal Art Society of New York. This image captured by Songquan Deng on September 11, 2011 (The Municipal Art Society of New York & Deng, 2011).
03 The Promise

One of the earliest memories is of my father bringing home this wooden, box-like thing, with a cloth grille on the front, and a little round, circular television screen, which, I believe, we had for some time prior to there actually being any broadcast to receive.

And then there was a test pattern. I think the test pattern preceded any actual broadcast for several weeks, and the test pattern itself was only available briefly, at scheduled times. And people – neighbours – would come, and they would look at this static non-moving pattern on the screen that promised ... something.

- William Gibson interviewed for the documentary No Maps for These Territories (Neale, 2000)

Why do so many people spend their lives sitting in front of a computer or television? I have never had a television. People are becoming more and more remote. We are becoming robots. It is this lack of humanity.

They say adapt or die. At my age, I feel I can’t adapt, because the new age is not an age that I grew up to understand. I see everything as cutting corners. All the old-fashioned ways of doings things have gone.

- Retired art teacher, Anne, 89, quoted before her assisted suicide in Zurich Switzerland on March 27 2014. From an article in Britain’s The Mirror newspaper, “Retired art teacher took her own life at Swiss suicide clinic after being ‘left behind by digital age’” (Layton, 2014)
If you could see everybody in the world all the time, where they were, what they were doing, who they spent time with, then you could create an entirely different world. You could engineer transportation, energy, and health systems that would be dramatically better. It’s this history of thinking about signals and people together, and how people work via these computer systems, and what data about human behaviour can do, that led me to the realization that we’re at a phase transition. We are moving from the reasoning of the enlightenment about classes and about markets to fine grain understanding of individual interactions and systems built on fine grain data sharing.

This new world could make George Orwell look like an unimaginative third stringer. It became really clear you had to think hard about the privacy and data ownership issues. Things that George Orwell didn’t realize were... that you can watch the patterns of people interacting then you can figure out things like who they’re going to vote for and how they’re going to react to various situations like changes of regulation, and so forth. You could build something that, to a first approximation, would be the real evil empire. And, of course, some people are going to try and do that.

- Alex “Sandy” Pentland in conversation with Edge.org, Reinventing Society In the Wake of Big Data, on August 30 2012 (Pentland, 2012)

The troubling conceit of the commercial provocateurs featured in the previous chapter is that the gloss and sparkle of the futurist pitch does little to empower the user or to imbue them with any tangible technical knowledge. There is a distinct absence of the mechanics of its operation or the history of its origin. The lavish sci-fi visual aesthetic of technology marketing does however propose a near future reality of personal technological transcendence and functional convergence. In the melding of mind and machine, the end user becomes moribund in Jaron Lanier’s buzzing incontinent hive as communication networks are likened to the “human nervous system”, cities become “organisms”, and software replicates itself as a “virus” or a “bug”. The individual then, the original replicant, becomes an anonymous clone lost in the rhetoric of the hive. As Lanier attests, “bits are presented as if they were alive, while humans are transient fragments. Real people must have left all those anonymous comments on blogs and video clips, but who knows where they are
now, or if they are dead? The digital hive is growing at the expense of individuality” (Lanier, 2011, p. 21).

The futurity of these biological metaphors conveniently assist the electronics manufacturer’s and service provider’s desire for uninhibited access to the user’s attention; it is their dream sequence as much as ours. What better way to achieve that rapt attention than to plug directly into the revenue source? For the production pipeline, for the subscription service, for the machine, we are only a proprietary socket away from the zeitgeist. And while Lanier’s much maligned hive may been compromised by the hive’s inability to shape shift and its individual member’s inability to separate the commercial from the personal, the meaning from the mush, and the observer from the observed – as with any proprietary free will, the hive’s true exploitative power lies in the totality of its mass. Here their “temporal analytics” – their moods, dreams, transactions, associations, movements - become an information of riches, the holy grail of Big Data hunters and gatherers (Musante, 2010).

At the moment, many electric power suppliers extol the advantages of plugging into their respective networks and vie for the favours of the socket seekers … This seems to be the dystopia made to measure of liquid modernity – one fit to replace the fears recorded in Orwellian and Huxleyan-style nightmares (Bauman, 2000, p. 15).

But how could this be? The pitch would seem plain enough: the techno-futurist narrative has our wellbeing at heart. Surely technological utopianism can circumvent almost any challenge – personal, professional, external or otherwise. Even the most horrific notions of the real could be washed away by the potential of technology to liberate us from repetitive work routines, the banality of labour-intensive domestic chores and the slow exchange of information. While some aspects of this ideology are certainly true – especially in the realms of manufacturing, the domestic space and personal communications – the totalising vision proposed by the likes of DHL, Microsoft, Nokia and other imagineers is far from the experience of our everyday reality. Microsoft’s attempts, for instance, to define the user experience through its advertising and marketing collateral reinforces this notion of an intangible future. Their strategy exposes the inherent ambiguity of trying to define the multifarious activities of the devices which run Microsoft software without succumbing to techno-futurist fantasy. Even Microsoft’s recent tile-centric overhaul of the interface of its Windows operating system, informally known as Metro, seems informed by the production design of an icon of early sci-fi computing fantasy, Stanley Kubrick’s 2001: A Space Odyssey (see Figure 97). Yet corporate flirtation with fantasy idealism, especially projections of a future world are not just restricted to TV commercials and advertising ephemera, many companies actively engage in
speculative fiction and release these ‘visions’ and ‘predictions’ to the wider public based presumably on heavy investment in R&D. Microsoft, Nokia, DHL and Ericsson have circulated numerous idealised visions of the near-future in recent years via sophisticated high-end video productions. Unlike the grandiose promises made by General Electric and Westinghouse in the 1930s, these videos whet consumer appetite by setting scenarios only a few years out from release. Microsoft for example has issued two projections: in 2009 the Microsoft Office Labs Vision 2019 video appeared and then an update, Productivity Future Vision, was released in 2011 tackling very similar themes. The clips generated from their Office Labs R&D arm, focus on productivity and engagement with ambient information. These near-future scenarios are depicted with a cinematic design aesthetic showcasing a sanitised version of familiar technologies including touch controls with credit card like interfaces, 3D image interaction with Office products, situational awareness, environments embedded with cameras (and projectors), shared video walls, wafer thin glass screens and dynamic ink on a variety of surfaces including glass, plastic and what appears to be paper. The art direction in both depicts an idyllic manifestation of early 21st century urbanism: clean lines of acrylic, stainless steel and glass, fluid public and private spaces, graceful motion, commercial free graphic design and robotic smiling avatars of our future productive selves (see Figures 98-101 and 106-110). These “lifestyles” and the augmented “technologies” play directly into the future design space of contemporary marketing in urban architecture and interior design. The intersecting design aesthetics of these advertorial narratives support a vision of the future which mimics the projected desire of consumers: a perverse un-reality because the vision is devoid of the commonality of the everyday object, the messiness of human behaviour and the proliferation of commercial visual signs which makes such a future seem so unlikely.

A support network of websites and downloadable collateral is also available to explain the content of these virtual video futures to help audiences appreciate the complexity of what lies
Nokia and Ericsson focus on their vision of a device dependent future in two corporate videos: *Mixed Reality – Nokia World* (Nokia, 2009) from their “Mixed Reality Experience Team” and *The Social Web of Things* (Ericsson, 2011) from the “User Experience Lab” at Ericsson. Again the ubiquity of embedded cameras, touch controls, facial recognition and miniaturisation is at the forefront of the narrative but with the addition of wearable interfaces and streamlined devices which are “socially aware” (see Figures 100 & 101). Again a plethora of ancillary content including corporate mini-sites and downloadable brochures trumpet the serious side of such future speculation - a dense interconnected web that blends corporate investment spin with speculative futurist fiction. Curiously more weight seems to be given to the fictional avatars and their relationships than to the technology. However, even the technology at times displays human characteristics appearing playful, cognisant and stubbornly persistent. The overarching themes in the films are strongly associated with the personal and the social connotations of this future narrative. Each video goes to some length to try and establish a clear link with the tangible devices they are showcasing. In the support text for the Nokia film, under the banner “Nokia Research Centre”, they claim that their “Mixed Reality Experience Team” has a mission “to provide enriching service experiences meeting people on their terms in their fused physical-digital worlds.”
And of course everyone is exceptionally beautiful in this corporate vision of the future. These post-present-avatars – from beyond the black mirrored screen – live a seamless, fluid streamlined existence devoid of targeted advertising, product logos, software watermarks, and copyright notices, protected from pollution, rust, phishing scams and conflict minerals, free from the mundane rituals of recharge cables, software updates, user names, passwords, brand lock-in, cluttered twitter feeds and uncomfortable status updates.

We get to know the avatars too: “David Ericsson” is a pleasant enough fellow who dreams of an intimate social life with another unseen but supposedly equally gorgeous clean cut avatar “Sophie”, however his dinner date is rebuffed – we do not hear the conversation, but witness the forlorn exchange as he drives home from work. Meanwhile his “Home” – with whom he communicates with regularly throughout the film – has been busily orchestrating all his domestic appliances for the imminent dinner date. However, when things change the “Home” swings into action with consolatory text messages and (in an act of inspired damage control) orders our sensitive leading man Chinese takeout for one and a pay-per view stream of the beautiful game (see Figures 106 & 107). Meanwhile, Microsoft has all the bases covered in a multilayered narrative involving “Ayla”, the conscientious Mum who on business trips finds comfort in technology that keeps her safe in unfamiliar places and (when all the hard speech writing and PowerPoint design work is done) also enables her to maintain her domestic
duties via virtual cake baking with her daughter (see Figure 108). Then there is “Qin”, the token Asian, who is reminded by a device in his pocket that while he’s waiting for a train he could be making better use of his time by donating to a neighbouring country less fortunate than his own (see Figure #). Finally young “Shannon” who wants to bake a cake and enjoys doing so with her Mum, Ayla by video conference while with her father spends an inordinate amount of time clicking and swiping and touching his fridge to see what’s inside rather than just opening the door and having a look for himself (see Figure 109). Meanwhile in the Nokia Mixed Reality film we witness the beginnings of a typical day for a cheerful young blonde avatar woken by a window displaying an apologetic text message from her beau, “Tom” – a cheerfully persistent young flirt – who makes all manner of effort in the featured three minutes to cast a technological spell upon our leading lady as she goes about her day. A day which mostly consists of relaxing in a sumptuously bright, breezy cottage replete with sandalwood furnishings and lime and white cotton as she reads via her Google Glass like device, news about cutting edge climate change initiatives, a stable EU economy and Britney Spears’ farewell gig on Mars (see Figure 111).

There is considerable effort put into not only the production qualities of these films, which are rich in production design and
misty on the cinematography but also the online support material that seeks to humanise the “social” aspect of these young good looking people. But they are, for want of a more precise marketing term – cyborgs/ bots/ skin-jobs - at best exotically complex emoticons. They are no more real than Viki in iRobot (Proyas, 2004), Maria in Metropolis (Lang, 1927), Gigolo Joe in A.I. Artificial Intelligence (Spielberg, 2001b) or even the comfort bots in Real Humans (Hamrell & Akin, 2012). This is as futuristic in its unattainability as any other commercially produced environment yet the difference is that while the humanoids from central casting might seem somewhat alien the technology is not. In this present-near-future there is a familiarity of both interface design and production aesthetic – the functional interactions, the touch and voice commands, and the glimpses of application features are nothing we haven’t seen from software packages and website publications before. The industrial design of the objects and devices also seem logical and familiar, in fact the technological forecasts of these productions are so reminiscent of our contemporary experience that this version of future seems oddly nostalgic. But this is not our reality. The simulation of light modernity software and information flows fulfils both our functional and aesthetic ideal of that technology by operating in stark contrast to our present-future experience.
This corporate-machine-vision of the world is produced under the pretext of originating from altruistic sterile “research labs”. This is not the cluttered commercial reality of our brand-orientated experiences; this is a past-present-future stasis which has been sanitised of all corporate intervention. As corporations continue to revamp the techno-cultural narrative via slight judicious tweaks, producing an ever cleaner and sharper aesthetic, the further away the near future appears to be – this creates not only a sense of intangibility but also of an endless inescapable present. Time and space collapse, we are everywhere but nowhere, connected but disconnected. “The question mark has moved from the side of the means to that of the ends. If applied to time-space relation, this means that since all parts of space can be reached in the same time-span (that is in ‘no time’), no part of space is privileged, none has ‘special value’” (Bauman, 2000, p. 118).

The lack of time-space proportions and hence the value of the pursuit or the discovery of knowledge also breeds a distinct lack of meaning; ubiquitous access becomes a de-motivator for the truth – if the truth is omnipresent it does not need to be found. The device aesthetic is at best vacant, purporting knowledge without actually containing any. It is a slip-gate between dimensions as explicit as any electric blue fiction: the clean cut lines of Apple products, the coloured Metro tiles of the Microsoft interface, the Eriksson touch screen, the Nokia data glasses are all genuine functions of the consumer as vacuous conduit between information and device, the Mecha and the Orga – the new aesthetics of man and machine collapsing in on one another. As Melanie Swalwell notes, in her deconstruction of contemporary experience advertising, this is a very deliberate ploy by corporations and advertisers to link the personal experience directly with the design value of technology:

The current period of technological change is one in which technology has increasingly come to be seen in aesthetic terms, that is, in terms of the senses and sensory experience. It was not always thus: until quite recently, technology was still frequently alleged to be asensual and anti-aesthetic, in line with classic humanist fears about technology’s alienating and dehumanising potential. Recent discourse on the experiential has been a factor in turning around such unfavourable impressions, to the point where technology is now frequently marketed – and, I argue, increasingly understood and felt – in terms of aesthetic and affective experience (Swalwell, 2012).

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39 Ericsson also goes so far as to have a bespoke research site that explains the hypothetical use of the human body as interface and conductor of information, the ultimate triumph of the society of information; see the “Connected Me” research [site](#).
This methodology is an extension of an already established paradigm within advertising\(^{40}\) however in this evolving space, technology is commodifying reality through the promotion of unrealistic social and personal benefits. The special value of experience – of going there to see – is transferred to the aesthetic value of the object – the device – and the access to the virtuality it provides. The adoption of smart phones and personal tablets is widespread and their increasingly sophisticated functions, which are essentially convergent properties of other consumer electronic devices, are being used as the primary drivers for the design of the future and the betterment of the individual. Personal fulfilment lies in the acceptance and mastery of this convergence and the sharing of such wisdom with others in a hyper-reflexive space of social media “push and pull”. Even the video campaigns described above have associated social media content, not on Facebook or Twitter or Instagram, but rather on bespoke corporate representations of such social media applications. In this idealised corner of the web AdWord panels, banner ads and the ubiquitous “like” and “share” buttons are conspicuously absent (Figures 112 & 113).

The authoring of the network as pure, as clean, as unadulterated is perhaps

\(^{40}\) Also see Selling Good(s): On the Genealogy of Modern Advertising from Pasi Falk’s classic text The Consuming Body for an historical account of this practice including the beginnings of experience advertising as designed by the Americans in the first decade of the 20th century, curiously at the same time as the Futurists were unfurling their technological manifestos.
the most fabulous fiction of all. We recognise the narrative conceit for its unreality and we can certainly identify the imposition placed upon us by the information generated because of our ongoing cohabitation with the precursors of these technologies. We understand that benefitting from the vast accumulation of information, can also be a curse. The weight, density and enormity of the present information torrent breeds anxiety and isolation through an ambiguity of context and meaning. The negation of individual identity becomes the entry fee to the hive but also the prize for those who would seek to exploit the hive. As Freeman Dyson observes, “the immense size of modern databases gives us a feeling of meaninglessness. Information in such quantities reminds us of Borges’s library extending infinitely in all directions. It is our task as humans to bring meaning back into this wasteland. As finite creatures who think and feel, we can create islands of meaning in the sea of information” (F. Dyson, 2011). This is a heavy burden to bear for the iUser. And if the guidelines for our interaction with information are confined to the social space of Microsoft, Nokia and Ericsson’s playfully naive virtual worlds then a coordinated effort to gain a deeper contextual understanding of information beyond the surface of the social media soup – to once again traverse the chasms between time and space – could be a futile endeavour. This is Futurist vapourware at its very best.

The problem is not lack of context. It is context collapse: an infinite number of contexts collapsing upon one another into that single moment of recording. The images, actions, and words captured by the lens at any moment can be transported to anywhere on the planet and preserved (the performer must assume) for all time. The little glass lens becomes the gateway to a black hole sucking all of time and space – virtually all possible contexts – in upon itself. The would-be vlogger, now frozen in front of this black hole of contexts, faces a crisis of self-presentation. In (Erving) Goffman’s terms, the would-be vlogger is “out of face” with no “line” to present, unable to size up the context and situation (Goffman, 1967, p. 14). Like a building collapse, context collapse does not create a total void but a chaotic version of its once ordered self (Wesch, 2008).

This infinitude of contexts and access points for the iUser is the premise of my creative work, the photographic installation Cyber City Mesh (Goodwin, 2011a) (see Figures 114-116). Constructed mostly from documentary photographs, the work attempts to articulate the multiplicity of the iUser’s networked experience in relation to the Cyber City, itself a manifestation of the network. The iUser becomes an informational node in a larger grid-like structure connected by device and data but also as a functional node, an active juncture, where they become plot points on the narrative circuit as consumer, documentarian and game character. In this space the central characters are commuters and pedestrians, head tilted down towards their screens, engaged yet anonymous citizens, not so much buzzing, but bubbling deep in Lanier’s virtual hive.
Cyber City Mesh is presented on a light table, the surface covered with an enlarged section of a Google Earth map showing the Arkihabara prefecture of Tokyo, also known as Electric Town. This visual design plays with Virilio’s reduction of the horizon line accentuating his “dromoscopic” view of the world in which the spaces of consumption and the site of haptic interaction become displaced, disturbed, rearranged into a top-down drone’s eye view of topographical space: “We suddenly jump from real-space de visu and in situ to the real-time tele-objectivity of an acceleration whereby the spaces of perception, the optical space and the haptic space of the tangible, undergo a disturbance – a topological or, more precisely, a TOPOSCOPICAL disaster” (Virilio, 2007, p. 20).

The core premise of the Cyber City Mesh is the capturing of the commuter, the pedestrian, the observer as they engage in private communications and interactions and capture, send and archive their environment as they navigate the grid of the Cyber City. My research documentation of commuters on Tokyo’s subway system and pedestrians in the luminescent surroundings of the Vivid Live arts festival in Sydney’s Circular Quay in 2010 are the source materials for the images which form the core of the Cyber City Mesh. They depict an engagement with both the internal and the external space of flows embedded within the code of the devices they grip in their hands. In the Tokyo subway where the shifting earth below makes the occasional audible grumble, the horizon literally becomes a dark reductive tunnel as the screen’s device provides the only means of escape.41

The Vivid Live event in Sydney is a multi-art multi-media festival incorporating “ideas” (speakers and

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41 Mobile phone flashlight applications were the most downloaded applications in the aftermath of the Japanese earthquake and resulting tsunami in March 2011.
demonstrations), “music” (mostly electronica) and “light” (installations and projections). The outdoor project mapping onto Sydney landmarks such as the Opera House, Customs House and the Museum of Contemporary Art is a gaudy millennial evocation of the World’s Fairs of the late 1880s. Here too glowing orbs of two dimensional surface textures projected onto pillars of sandstone, concrete and ceramics provide a startling spectacle for the audience swarming from the hive and out into the streets and walkways surrounding Circular Quay.

Printed on translucent paper the high contrast silky visage of the pedestrians and commuters bleed up from the light table below much like the mobile phone screen which is the
object of their attention. The irregular placement of their portraits in the frame of the Google Earth print is at odds with the strict grid lines of Electric Town and brings to mind Wesch’s “chaotic version” of the Cyber City’s once ordered self (see Figure 115 & 116). At the centre of this installation is the ominous red glowing orb of the Earthquake early warning system, a commonplace object in Japan and a very real and very machine-like symbol of the omnipresent danger lurking below the grid itself. The portraits which surround this image then seem inconsequential, themselves absent in their distraction born of the device and the electronic dreamscape rather than of the earth or of the simulated concrete edifice that hems them in.

What the commuter as consumer experiences then is less of the device, less of the technology but more of the role of avatar in an advertorial, their peak-hour screen immersion a “hyper-stimulation often presented as desirable, part of what it meant to be up to date, fully experiencing the present” (Swalwell, 2012). The luminescence of the subjects in the photographs upon the light table and their unwavering focus on their screens is heavily weighted with our knowledge of what is to come. The foreboding anticipation of these images brings shades of the apocalypse into being. The end can be felt in the garish posters, the exposed pipes and cabling, the exit signs, the columns of cement and the curving tiled walls which enclose the Tokyo commuter within its underground embrace.

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The luminescence of the spectacle of the big screen advertorial, the empty visage of the end times, the public space of the digital commons is a dense narrative mesh. As Daniel Miller notes in “On the Post City” in his analysis of the post-zombie apocalypse:

The creatures embody the flip−side of a total environment that is less a real city than a virtual environment coded to look like one. The former is a space of encounters, intimate revolutions, sudden exposures. The latter is a frozen world of static. Immersed in the amniotic embrace of communications technology, which offers the promise of surfing on your interests forever, the full spread of a user’s psychic demands can be met (Miller, 2009).

And if that seems a limited vacuous description of the techno-futurist promise in comparison to the grandiose manifestos of the Futurists and the corporate purveyors of the World’s Fairs who relied so heavily on the big picture narrative, then perhaps it is because it is. In this chapter we have seen how Jaron Lanier’s notion of the “hive mind” has diluted the notion of the individual and that corporate imagineers have commodified the concept of that individual as a homogenous networked node. My
creative work Cyber City Mesh explores the inverse of this as the iUser seeks to participate within the hive but as a far more active and engaged urban netizen; albeit through the mediated prism of the screen. Meanwhile Virilio’s tele-objectivity has begun to shrink the dreamscape stepping back the focus ring of Futurism as the collective turning away begins – away from the trauma of context to a smaller more manageable personal screen space.

The future dreaming of Microsoft, Nokia and Ericsson have made the future a personal one. The horizon line is shrinking with the atmosphere, the future the receding sunlight beneath the door. The new frontier – the one that the Cyber City is prepared to comprehend – is now only screen deep. Tomorrow’s future pixel perfect narrative of a grand urban utopia as once promised by the widescreen vistas of General Motors and Westinghouse has now been dramatically recalibrated. As I will demonstrate in the following chapter, even that harbinger of space exploration NASA has had its wings clipped and its ambitions stalled as corporate branding and military interests hijack the space exploration narrative. The outcome of this is that the future becomes a simulation; a beautiful sequence of animations and colour composites in which even the fabric of the universe is only pixel deep.