ARTS ILLUSTRATED

Death by Wool

Death by Freezing

Death by 3D

Death by Candlewax

Death by Caption

Death by Overdose

Death by Xerox

Death by Sharpener

Death by Stencil

Death by Dental Floss

Death by Teabag

Death by Fire

Cover Artist - Tara Kelton

'Death By…' is a project Tara initiated while she was at Yale. 'I found these small plastic architectural figures in a New Haven art store, and amused myself by destroying one of them in a new way, every day, for a period of three months,' she says. This resulted in a series of images of these tiny 'people' dying in immediate ways ranging from being sharpened in a sharpener, taken apart with pliers, to the more metaphorical like 'disappointment', and 'deletion', and elaborate ones, like 'electrocution' and 'freezing'. This was a quick and spontaneous process for Tara, and a lot of the 'ways to die' ended up being things that she found around in her apartment. She recalls 'When I cooked one of the figures on the stove, tiny bits of plastic flew up in the air and straight into my nose...it was almost death by inhalation, but this time for me and not the figurine!'

For the cover of this issue on Humour, Tara chose 32 images from the original series of 95. 'I was able to quickly narrow it down to my favourite 32, but I always find the act of sequencing quite daunting and I can be a bit obsessively compulsive about trying every possible option before deciding. I thought about how many possibilities there must be mathematically.' Tara actually asked a mathematician friend and when she learnt that there are approximately 260-billion-trillion-trillion possible ways to combine the 32 images (that's 26 plus 35 zeroes), she was hoping for us to give her the time to try each of those. But when that was not possible, she just used instinct and arranged them quite quickly, visually.

The size of the figure within the frame is kept consistent across the series. She consciously uses a limited and neutral palette. While most of the 'deaths' were analogue, they were broken up with some digital gestures like 'Death by Pixelation', 'Death by Blur', and 'Death by Caption'.

'Death By…' seems quite removed from the rest of Tara's practice, but on a closer inspection many parallels are found, like the incorporation of both the analogue and the digital, and blurring the line between humour and darkness, something that can be observed throughout her work.

Conceptualisation of the cover and text above by Rahul Kumar.

Funny Lines

Artist Tara Kelton's practice gives us a peek into the absurdity often defining our world
while effortlessly juggling human responses with mechanised realities

RAHUL KUMAR

Tara Kelton is half-Texan and half-Gujarati, who at the time of this interview had spent exactly fifty percent of her life in the United States, and fifty percent of it in India. Tara's parents met at film school and moved to India after she was born. 'They lived in a crumbling British bungalow, with five dogs, three cats, birds, fish and rabbits, and bats hanging from the rafters,' she recounts. Raised around hippies, musicians and artists, art was a part of Tara's life from an early age. Her practice involves playful and low-tech gestures that investigate place, distance, time, location and authorship in the digital age. She explores relationships between the hand-made and the mechanical, between the 'artist's hand'/physical gesture and digital reproduction, and between

the now omnipresent digital screens and the physical space surrounding them. 'Recently, I visited an animation studio. In the middle of the day, we entered a pitch dark yet enormous room filled with a sea of computers, where we could see dozens of zombie-eyed workers, faces lit up by the light from their computer screens. Each one working on a tiny component of some large animated film, all outsourced from the United States. Many of the projects they worked on were actually major American animated films, most of which I had seen, but it was quite depressing to see behind the curtain. Increasingly, humans are in service of the machines, rather than the other way around, fulfilling the dumbest roles in the system,' she says.

'I am more interested in having my work speak about the technology than relying on complex apparatus and technical gimmickry, where you charm the viewer with technical complexity. I also love discovering software/hardware platforms that were designed to do one thing, and making them do something else entirely!'

It's this underlying worldview, perhaps, an emphatic vision delightfully mixed with the irreverent in Tara's work that encourages the viewer to question the stereotypical in a quirky and satirical way. She has worked with a variety of materials and methods ranging from animated GIFs, browser-based applications to acrylic sculpture, billboards, and, well, fake flowers.

Autoportrait, Custom software application in browser, 2012 (screen-capture from browser). Anonymous online workers paid $.50 each to draw their own portrait. Custom software application combines their drawings in real time.

Your art practice investigates the relationship between humans and machines. What, in your experience as an artist, is truer about technology – is it creating connections or distances? How do you see technology?

My relationship with technology has changed considerably in the past decade; it has become more complicated, and much darker. I grew up reading a lot of science fiction. As a child I was obsessed with and excited about the future – but then the future arrived, and it was a lot more horrifying than I expected, and much closer to dystopian than I think anyone would have imagined. Centralised systems of power, mass surveillance and the end of privacy, artificially intelligent autonomous robots, genetic engineering, election-hacking, fake news…all while humanity spends its days making cat memes and playing with fidget spinners! Lately, I am also experiencing a kind of 'digital fatigue' and I think a lot of people are feeling this way. You can see the trend towards nostalgia, in old-world typewriters and urban farming! And, I find myself turning to more traditional forms like drawing, as a respite. So, in my work, I keep making connections between artist and machine, artist and labour, labour and machine.

Several of your projects revolve around collaborations that are not based on traditional formats. For instance, in your project titled Autoportrait, you hired 'anonymous online workers' to draw their own portraits and then combined their drawings in the browser, in real-time, using custom software. I am intrigued to know how their personal

experiences contribute to the authorship of the work.

Yes, many of my projects examine how technology can complicate authorship, and the new modes of collaboration that have become possible in the wake of the Internet allowing for an increased connectivity between people, new forms of hardware and cheap computing. In works like *Autoportrait*, *Still Life with a Curtain*, and *Leonardo*, I quite intentionally open up the question of the author. My collaborators' experiences (and aesthetics) are precisely what the work is concerned with. I am particularly interested in popular conceptions of art and visual languages that live outside the art world – one of my ongoing conceptual projects is to take away all of my own formal choices from the work; rather than simply eliminating form, I give that space up to someone else's visual decision. In many of my projects I have worked with visual/digital workers in 3D rendering or photo studios, who do not have a formal art education, and typically learn through apprenticeships – I see them as a kind of craftspeople of our times, and I am very curious about their visual realities.

Given that most of your work is experimental, in a sense, is the outcome completely unpredictable for you as the creator, or is the unpredictability more in the realm of the viewer?

The experiments are definitely something I do for myself; they are what keep me excited about producing work. I think of my projects as computer programs, where I set up rules (or algorithms) that result in unpredictable

outcomes. Or sometimes they are closer to science projects, where I have a hypothesis, and I am doing the project just to find out if something will work or not. On the occasions where the experiment can be run in real time (like in *Autoportrait*), the viewer does get to share the experience with me, where the output is being randomly generated while the work is on display. While these experiments are designed to have unpredictable outcomes, the way the instructions are written can greatly vary the nature of the output, and that is where I think the authorship comes in – the rules (and the level of control) can be tightened and loosened, and I still have to make careful, intentional decisions, modifying the rules as I go to achieve the best results. So, I think the unpredictability lies more in my experience than in that of the viewer!

Humour and satire are used as a method for criticality in your work. Would you agree that the pre-disposed mind of the viewer based on the cultural experiences form an integral part of how the work is interpreted? And, if yes, given technology's accessibility, do you also take into account the debilitating limitlessness of it all? My funny may not be your funny, but could be everybody's funny.

I do not believe humour is that culturally specific – I think humour is human and universal. If anything, I think the connectivity of our present era is a homogenising force and is causing culture to converge – and that there is frequently more of a divide between people who do not have access to certain media or the Internet and those who do, or between rural and


THERE IS A WHITE OAK LOOKING TABLE COVERED WITH A VARIETY OF ITEMS. THESE ITEMS INCLUDE A WHITE COTTON TABLECLOTH, CRUMPLED IN DIFFERENT PLACES. IT IS COVERING THE LOWER RIGHT CORNER OF THE TABLE AND THEN IT SWOOPS DOWN AND COMES BACK UP. A WHITE BOWL WHICH IS MORE SIMILAR TO A SHALLOW DISH THAN A BOWL WITH AN ORANGE RIM CONTAINS FIVE ORANGES AND IS PINNING DOWN A SECTION OF THE WHITE TABLECLOTH. ONLY A HALF OF THE TABLE IS SHOWN IN THE PAINTING. THIS BOWL IS IN THE MIDDLE OF THE TABLE. BEHIND IT IS A WHITE PORCELAIN PITCHER COVERED WITH FLOWERS. A BIG PINK FLOWER IS THE FOCAL POINT WITH SMALLER ORANGE FLOWERS BELOW IT. IT IS A SYMMETRICAL IMAGE. TO THE RIGHT OF THAT VASE (WHICH IS TO THE RIGHT OF THE SHALLOW BOWL) THERE IS ANOTHER SMALLER SHALLOW BOWL THAT IS WHITE. THERE ARE THREE ORANGES IN THAT BOWL. BETWEEN THE TWO BOWLS AND IN FRONT OF THE VASE ARE TWO SMALL APPLES AND A LARGE NAVEL ORANGE BEHIND IT. BEHIND THE SMALLER BOWL AND NEXT TO THE VASE ARE TWO ORANGES. THERE IS A CRUMPLED, THICKER FABRIC COMING FROM THE TOP OF THE IMAGE DRAPING DOWN ONTO THE TABLE. ITS BASE COLOR IS DARK BLUE WITH GOLD LEAVES AS A PATTERN. THE FABRIC DRAPES DOWN TO THE LEFT OF THE VASE AND MEETS UP WITH THE WHITE TABLECLOTH. THE BACKGROUND OF THE PAINTING IS A MIXTURE OF DEEP BLUES AND PURPLES.

— A1N0KC6KGOYQS8

Still Life with a Curtain. Inkjet on paper. 2015 (series of eight)
Popular Impressionist painting recreated by 3D rendering studios in Bengaluru, after being given text descriptions of the painting.

Still Life with a Curtain. Inkjet on UV-coated wallpaper. 2015 (series of eight)
Anonymous online workers paid by the artist to describe a popular 19th-century Impressionist painting.

Leonardo. Video. 53s. 2011 (video still)
A portrait 'drawing' machine at a shopping mall is made to create its self-portrait by placing a mirror inside the portrait booth.
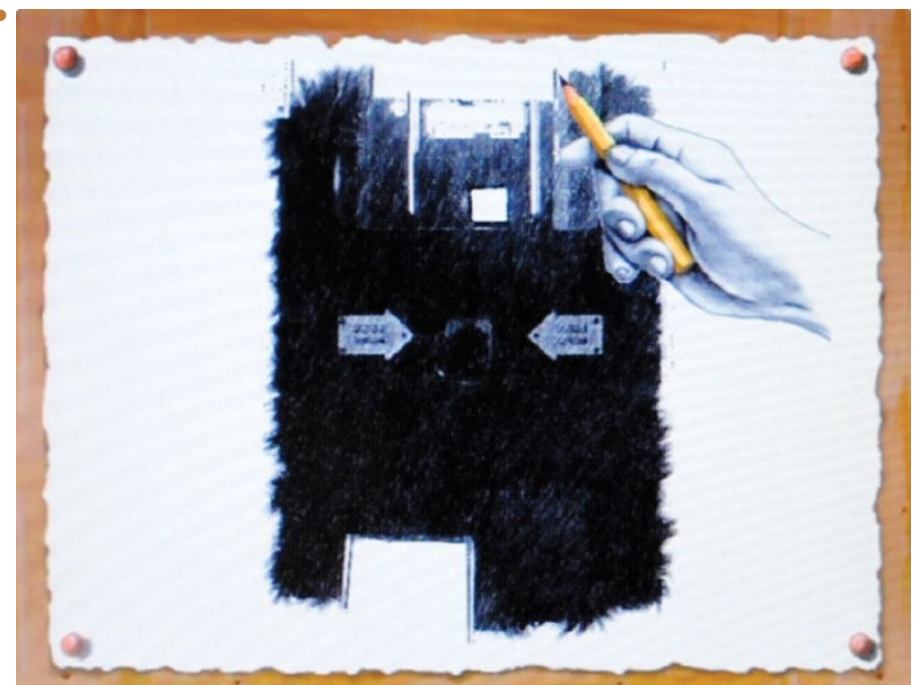
Contents

– 1 Internal Memory Drive in
Tara Kelton's brain
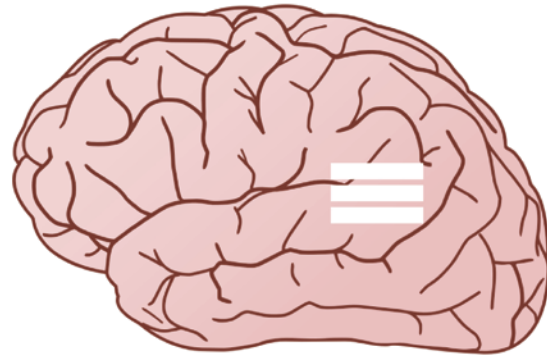
2

Storage

During data transfer, your image must be presented to your device for a minimum of fifteen minutes, either over video chat, or in person – the longer the exposure time, the higher the resolution of the stored data.

Writing/rewriting can be executed once every three months. Number of rewrites is limited to the lifespan of the drive.

You can retrieve your data a maximum of twice per month (three days time must be permitted for receipt of your image data).

When you wish to delete your data, please submit a written request for deletion.

4

Human Memory Drive. Artist's Memory. 2017 (pages from User Manual)
In Human Memory Drive, the artist auctioned an image's worth of space inside her memory that is accessible to the winning buyer of the work for as long as she is living. In the work, Tara effectively functions as a hard drive - the buyer can store any image they wish in her brain (by showing it to her) - she then 'stores' this image in her memory and recollects the memory for the buyer in the form of a 4" x 6" drawing each time they make a request to access their image.

Privacy

Much like with large corporations who store our data like Amazon, Google and Facebook, your privacy is not guaranteed. Tara Kelton reserves the right to share your data at a future time, without your knowledge. Even if you delete your data, it may remain somewhere in her memory.

3

Warranty

Limited lifetime warranty. Does not cover illness, normal wear and tear or accidental damage.

5

Time Travel. Video. 10m53s. 2009 (video still)
Using a video camera, a rewire cable and a laptop, the artist attempted time travel on a train from Bengaluru to Bangarapet. She placed a video camera at the front of a train car, facing out the door. Live video feed was sent from the camera to the laptop, which sat in front of a second door at the back of the train car. When viewing the laptop she was able to see approximately 1/10th of a second into the "future".

urban spaces, than there is between nations. While I do travel across cultures, most of what I reference is understood in the spaces it occupies. It is something I am always conscious of though, probably because I have spent a lot of time moving between places, and I do attempt to make my work have at least one reading that is accessible to anyone, regardless of the context.

An extension of this thought, in any creative practice, it is hard to contextualise humour, given its subjective appeal, and yet, there is a world teeming with humour in your works. Drawing Ideas, for instance, that was crowd-sourced, is one such example. As was Homeward, in a dark, surreal way. How do you then classify humour in your work?

Humour is a way for me to get people to enter the work, and it allows me to take a critical position without being overly didactic. And it is also a kind of defence, a protective coating – I belong to the 'irony' generation. We are uncomfortable with being too sincere. I think we perceive too much sincerity as falsehood, unfortunately! I would like to try being sincere sometime, as an experiment… and even that sounds sarcastic.

There is a lot of play with form in your works within a cohesive structure. In 'Time Lapse', for instance, we are meant to look at the security guard at the Taj Mahal, which, to me, in itself was immensely playful and deeply subvertive of what the Taj even stands for. I am not even looking at the Taj. And that, noticeability within un-noticeability, is precisely what humour does. How do you contain a certain sense of the absurd without losing the essence of it all? Is this even a conscious process?

The security guard at the Taj Mahal was an accidental discovery – I spend a lot of time wandering around places in Google Street View as a sort of 'virtual tourist', and I am particularly interested in tourist and monument sites, and the culture surrounding them. Perhaps, because in India I am perpetually treated like a tourist, even in the neighbourhood I grew up in, while in the United States where I actually feel like an alien, I blend in completely. In its mapping of famous monuments, Google imposes a rigid, mechanised system to the way these sites are recorded and represented – with a 360° panoramic camera capturing each site, segment by segment,

Google attempts to create an 'official' map – a virtual, traversable replica of the real world in the continuous present, outside time or history. I was interested in how the security guard completely disrupted that, and how there was a human narrative waiting to be discovered inside Google's cold, mechanised system – the guard can be clearly seen interacting with the Google camera, beckoning it forward, clearing people out of the way, and even laughing, humanising the whole process. These are the sort of unusual moments of friction between man and machine that I am interested in – for me, humour is just an entry point to get people to enter the work. I do not think it is at cross-purposes with what the work is trying to say, it is just another layer.

What are your concerns that you try to address with your latest project – 'Human Memory Drive'? You auction an image's worth of space inside your own memory that is accessible to the winning buyer of the work for as long as you live, to recollect the memory in the form of a 4 × 6 drawing. How do you expect the viewer to deal with the reality that changes every time you create a new drawing?

Homeward. Robot vacuum cleaner, portable projector, looped video. 2014
A portable projector placed on a Roomba (robot vacuum cleaner) plays a loop of nature videos (taken from treadmills used for virtual exercising). The Roomba walks tirelessly through these landscapes on a journey to a home that it can never reach.

In *Human Memory Drive*, I have reversed the roles – rather than creating instructions for someone to execute, I become the labour, executing the viewer's instructions myself (storing and recalling, and then drawing their memories).

In the uncertain times that we live in, human memory could be a more stable (although blurry and indefinite) form of data than digital storage, which can be erased, hacked and whose shelf life is precarious. Human memory can at least serve as a genuinely alternative form of back up. Unlike with a typical hard drive, here the image will be unique each time it is retrieved – it will fade over time, behaving more like older, analogue forms of storage, like a photograph, or even an oral history, where the storage device (my mind) alters what is being stored, and gets woven together with the memory.

This is such a recent project (the auction just happened), that I have not made a single drawing yet. I am hoping the imperfection of the drawings is something the viewer (or hard drive "user") will appreciate, but to me this work is as much about the process as it is about the drawings. It is such a long-term project, (the length of my entire life) and the structure is so unusual. I am mostly looking forward to everything surrounding the drawings – I am curious about the relationship that will develop between the user and myself over time, and about what types of communication may come out of it. I also really hope they actually use the hard drive and do not just forget it in a drawer!

And, finally, given the delicious fluidity in your work, what is the lens that you consciously wear when you set out to create: meticulous artist, committed viewer or the disinterested passerby?

All of these.

ORIGINAL   (CORRECTED)
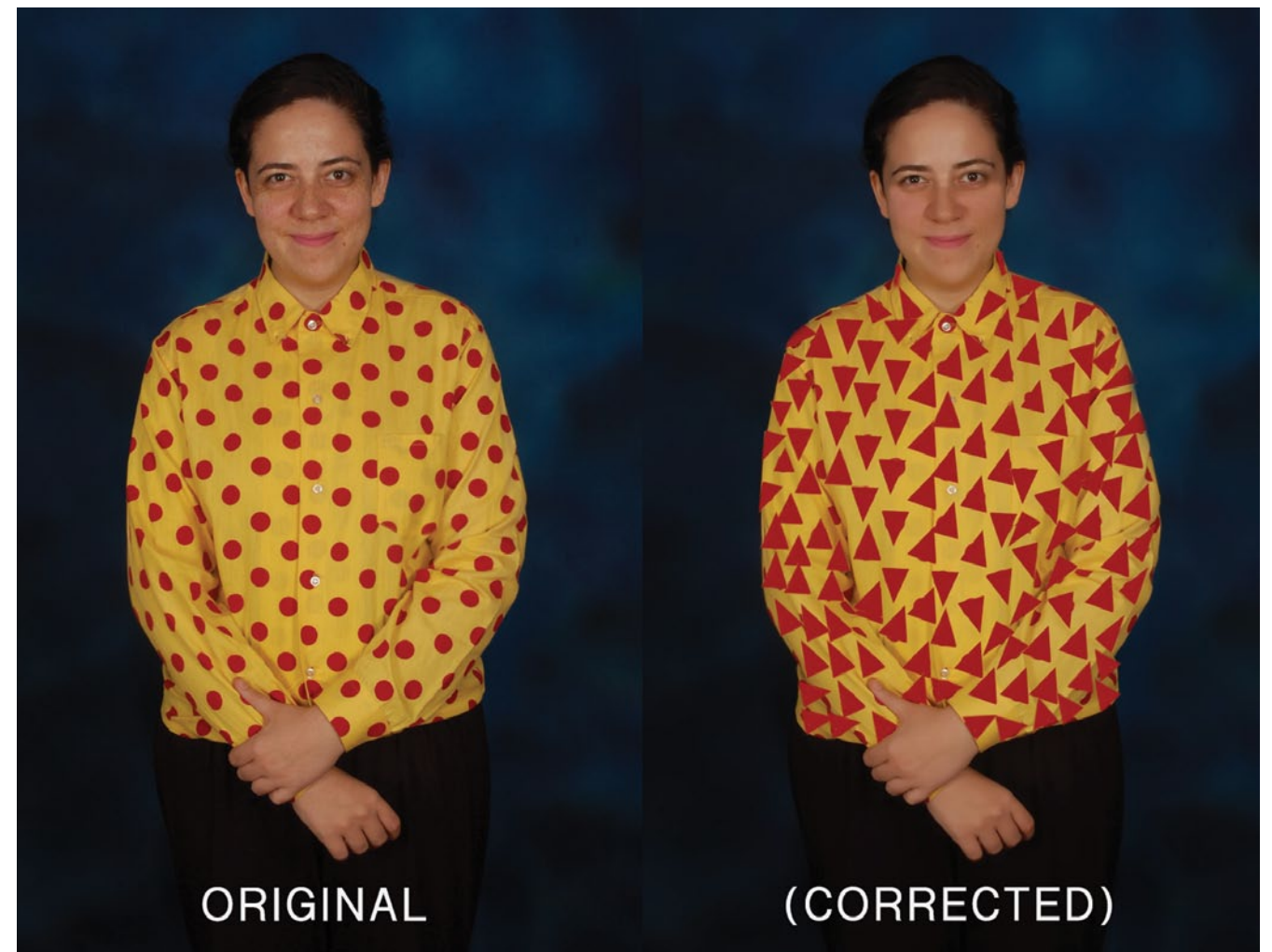
Tara Kelton portrait

All images courtesy of Tara Kelton.

Death by Smoking

Death by Ball-point Pen

Death by Chewing Gum

Death by Voodoo

Death by Flesh-eating Cannibals

Death by Stapler

Death by Ink

Death by Deletion

Death by Cactus

Death by Shrinking

Death by Vacuum Seal

Death by Mummification

Death by Pixellation

Death by Clothespin

Death by Stovetop