



Figure 1. *Lake Dock*, 2016

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Some days the world feels like crazy piled on crazy. What triggered the feeling for me today was a *New York Times* warning that the levels of information pollution produced by machines “a few years from now could just get bizarre.”¹ As if its not bad enough already the *Times* asks us to imagine the fake news of today a million-fold over.

While the technology at issue is new, the feeling is not. Artists have been grappling with the ways in which technology dillutes, fragments and muddies human meaning at least since the introduction of photography in 1839. Indeed, something like this grappling is the root meaning of modernism and postmodernism alike.

¹ Alec Radford, a researcher at the company OpenAI in San Francisco, quoted in Cade Metz and Scott Blumenthal, “How A.I. Could Be Weaponized to Spread Disinformation,” *The New York Times*, June 7, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/06/07/technology/ai-text-disinformation.html>.

Generally, artists have adopted one of two approaches to this problem: either they have sought to reflect the confusion, alienation and anxiety that technology produces or they have sought to respond with their own alternative, with a different way of representing that does not so readily become just one more sign amidst the Tsunami of others. Both strategies can be called “abstraction,” and we can use a familiar comparison to illustrate.

Think, on the one hand, of any Andy Warhol screen-printed work that comes to mind—his later soup cans, for example, or his Marilyn's or his Maos. This work was abstract in the sense of being at a remove from the expressive process and thus felt disembodied, invulnerable and fun. It is a type of art that is plain about its meaning but much less clear about how the artist felt about it. It is an expression of an idea, image or product at a defended remove from the vagaries of emotional life.²

Now think of any of Jackson Pollock's drip paintings. The speed and relative lack of control of the paint application process gives the impression of directly expressed feelings or impulses with only minimal mediation by ideas.

Each of these two approaches simplifies the experience of world through abstraction—one by reducing legible feeling and the other by reducing legible meaning. One risks becoming all mind, the other all body. Either of these ways of experiencing the world on its own can be destructively self-involved.

Melissa's work doesn't indulge in either of these reductions but instead works to put them into a generative dialogue. Take her 2016 *Lake Dock* as an example. [Figure 1] On the one hand, the dock is painted with only a minimal sense of the activity of the artist or the activity of the scene and instead pops forward in our vision with all the abstract, sign-like impersonality of Warhol. The lake, on the other hand, is full of painterly activity and pictorial allusions to the effects of the atmospheric conditions. As such, we are asked to consider lake and dock, idea and feeling, in concert.

When we experience people, places and things only as signs, only as ideas, we lose access to the nuance of what they are saying to us. We ask the world to comport to our own thin, schematic, conceptual understanding. We risk the biases, stereotypes and misunderstanding that are products of our own minds. So too when we experience the world only through our senses: we lose access to our capacity for shared reasoning and the distinctively human forms of sociality that capacity allows.

Melissa's work offers us the experience of body and mind, of sense experience and conceptual understanding, as check and balance for each other. This is an offer worth taking. In the end, it is only such self-reinforcing humility that keeps us grounded, open and wise when the world feels like it is gearing up against us.

² For more on this theme see Blake Stimson, *Citizen Warhol* (London: Reaktion, 2013).