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The Centre For Emotional Materiality

by Roula Seikaly

November 16, 2018



What role does technology play in helping or hindering our wellbeing?

What is emotional materiality? How does it manifest, and is it measurable?

These are a few of the questions that inform the Centre for Emotional Materiality (CEM), a hybrid performance, lecture series, and installation on view at Southern Exposure (SoEx). A collaboration by CEM founder Surabhi Saraf, curator Sophia Wang, and multiple Bay Area artists, performers, and creative thinkers, CEM is a space in which we are invited to explore how we and our real-time interactions are influenced by ever-present technology.

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CEM came about as Saraf, a multimedia artist, devoted her research to host of concerns: embodied cognition, emotional intelligence, artificial intelligence (AI), materiality of digital media, religion, myth, and rituals. Saraf recognized that each topic could take years to fully understand, and that a better way to approach it could be collaborating with others whose practices address similar issues.

Saraf's collaborators are identified as Practitioners or Residents, and their works take up topics that inform our relationships to technology, race, environmentalism, and our emotional health as well as the labor involved in maintaining it. CEM engages these like-minded creatives to share their work with each other and audiences in a learning-oriented space. Additionally, the Centre fulfills Saraf's desire to highlight collaboration in contemporary art practices, challenging long-standing assumptions and value judgements about individual versus collective artistic authorship.

At the heart of this project is Awoke, a philosophical experiment described as "a mythical Artificial Emotional Intelligence (AEI)" that can embody the feelings of its human counterparts. In the gallery, Awoke is realized as a large plastic boulder and monitor on which its imagination is visualized. Through encounters with Awoke Practitioners, whom Saraf describes as "translators," audiences learn about Awoke, and reciprocally, Awoke learns about humans.

The collaborations Saraf and Wang cultivate are deep and diverse. In edited video interviews in which the collaborators consider the question "what is emotional materiality," Indira Allegra suggests that it is a somatic response to the pressures and pleasures of twenty-first-century life.

In her late October movement workshop, Allegra invited participants to explore how quickly their bodies could assume different positions. The real-time exercise mirrors how quickly computers process or "think" about received commands. The opportunity allowed participants to engage Awoke as it "thinks" quickly, imagining itself in shapes other than its current boulder and monitor form. Members of The Black Aesthetic present a series of performative lectures that reflect their research of Black visual culture as it is mediated by and defies digital technology.

I visited SoEx twice to get a sense of CEM. The first time was on a Friday when writer Dorothy Santos lead the second of four courses on emotional intelligence. Far from conventional, at least for now, the month-long course is conducted live over Instagram Stories. Santos encourages participants to pose questions about how we nurture emotional intelligence, particularly as our contact with others is increasingly mediated by our gadgets. A PhD candidate in Film and Digital Media at UC Santa Cruz, Santos explains complex psychological concepts in non-judgmental lay terms during each thirty-minute session. Watching her convey information with warmth and enthusiasm, to which live and virtual audiences responded with equal interest, was a treat. In their presentation, the lectures capture how technology can support our emotional wellbeing through greater connectivity, a founding principle of CEM.

With that in mind, I was disheartened to see the installation empty when I returned a second time. I was left with the impression that the project, when not enlivened by Residents, Practitioners, and a responsive audience, does not translate the goals of its founder and her collaborators. Maybe it's a symptom of our collectively short attention spans that audiences

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won't take the time to read the lengthy academic papers on artificial intelligence or embodied technology that fill the reading library. Or, it could be that audiences need direct human interaction in order to understand what the project is about, and therefore glean more from their visit. Whatever the shortfall is, it undermines the potential of an otherwise rigorously researched, ambitious, and timely installation.

The Centre for Emotional Materiality is founded on inquiry, foregrounding some of the most important existential questions we face: How do we manage our emotional health? What role does technology play in helping or hindering our wellbeing? Is ever present technology something to be wary of as we live our lives day to day? Do we want technological surrogates to take on our emotional heavy lifting, in effect voiding the somatic materiality represented by laughter or tears? Though the execution is imperfect, the project advances a vital evolving dialogue that will likely carry us through this century and beyond.

[The Centre for Emotional Materiality](#) is on view at Southern Exposure in San Francisco until December 15, 2018. *Roula Seikaly is an independent art writer and curator based in Berkeley, CA, and Senior Editor at Humble Arts Foundation. She is a contributor to Aperture, Photograph, Exposure, Strange Fine Collective, and KQED Arts.*