

Common Absurd

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So long, user

Writing in the late 1960s, the French sociologist Alain Touraine asserted a "return of the actor", as a foil for explaining the conditions of a post-industrial age. He argued that individuals no longer appeared merely as cogs in a machine; instead, they were emerging as reflexive agents capable of shaping culture, contesting power, and actively participating in the construction of social life. The rise of networked computing seemed to fulfill the promise, with the early internet roundly celebrated as a participatory space. The tropes that followed are at this point well-worn: groups and individuals producing media according to their own niche interests, building communities online as they navigated digital environments with an unprecedented sense of autonomy. By Touraine's lights, the post-industrial actor exercised a new control upon their activities, disengaging from bland norms of behavior and consumption to produce models for living otherwise.

The *user* emerged as a catch-all referent for this new subjectivity, mixing consumer, creator, technician, actor, and audience member into a composite heroic position that anyone might plausibly occupy.

Adam Basanta's *Common Absurd* situates itself in the conundrum of what to make of this nearly forty-year-old figure, now that living as a "creative user" feels so much more like a mandated norm than an emancipatory possibility. *Clocks Against Time* (2024) calls to mind the ways that we find ourselves caught in a perpetual present, unable to organize a shared sense of temporal continuity thanks to the constant, pre-emptive synchronicities of an automatic society. *Lonely Abundant* (2026) commentates daily ritual under these conditions, each of us obliged to hold our own across the systems, trends, and crises that serialize our lives. *Hope Finds Well* (2024) riffs on language falling ever more prey to operational procedures and protocols, continuing themes from *All We'd Ever Need Is One Another* (2018) by looping together two chatbots that perpetually communicate their professionalized care. *Tower* (2026) functions as an abject monument to the fantasized, one-person music label that early CD-ROM burners afforded, long since superseded by the recommendation engines that now canalize culture into giant stroads of taste. *Discourse* (2026) meanwhile cheekily gestures to the exhaustion of industrial sociality online, condensing the idea that shared signs have never mattered more than the profitable statistical signals they correlate.

Taken together, Basanta's post-instrumentalist works connect with our compulsively invested, but only ever vaguely felt sense of technological progress; this at a time when the dominant sense on offer can feel dangerously unfit for purpose. In an ideal world, technical objects develop by gradually integrating their components into an ever-more unified and internally compatible system. But a technology is said to go *hypertelic* when it starts to evolve in an overly specialized direction, exceeding or distorting its original functional coherence, and thereby losing its balance for having become too narrowly optimized. Basanta's strategy seems to involve deflating functional coherence into aesthetic mechanism, to expose this compatibilization as more deeply listless and lost. Is it possible for whole technological systems to go hypertelic? On this question, the work bemusedly points backwards to the obsolescing patterns and interfaces of human users under threat of replacement by the latest agentic machines, while also gesturing uneasily towards something else, beyond technical utility itself as we experience it in the everyday.

We typically perceive our relationship to the technical in terms of transparent use and occasional breakdown, necessitating repair, maintenance, and redesign regimes that can sometimes tell us something about how we care for one another. Individual devices show up to us as convenient and optimizing, or frustratingly broken or distracting supplementations to our habits and practices.

But there are also bigger issues worth considering, when it comes to the overall milieu we've constructed for ourselves through technological systems writ large. The philosopher Gilbert Simondon says as much when he writes that, "In the same way one used to consider journeys as a means for acquiring culture, because they constituted a mode of placing man into a situation, one should also consider the technical experiences of being placed into a situation with respect to an ensemble, with effective responsibility, as having cultural value."¹ One may take the exhibited works to be emplacing their audience in this way, *Common Absurd* demonstrating with a light touch that we are approaching some kind of collective fork in the road, when it comes to our embedding in the internet's technical phylum.

¹ Gilbert Simondon, Cécile Malaspina, and John Rogove. *On the Mode of Existence of Technical Objects*. Minneapolis, Univocal Publishing, 2017, p. 235.

— Neal Thomas