

# On Technology and Heart

Ayse Demir  
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*Abbott Handerson Thayer, 1889, Art Institute of Chicago*

A few years ago, while I was in Chicago for work, I came across this painting while walking through the back galleries of the Art Institute. A woman standing alone among enormous antique furniture. Her right hand rests over her heart, her eyes closed. If I am sharing this image here today, I probably do not need to explain what kind of catharsis that moment opened for me.

I, too, have had a psychosomatic discomfort in my heart for quite some time, one I find difficult to write about, or more generally to bring into view. Its cause turns around a single axis, but carries the traces of more than one situation I have lived through over the past thirty-something years. When I meditate, I experience this feeling as a black mass.

One of the reasons I can write about this here is that in 2017, I lived for two years in San Francisco's Mission neighborhood, an area deeply marked by homelessness. Even then, in a city where self-driving cars and food delivery robots were already roaming the streets, the short circuit produced between my brain and my body by the city's contradictions had a name: alienation. Its source was not fear of, or unease around, unhoused people, but witnessing, in the midst of so much wealth and technology, a level of isolation and dehumanization I had never seen before in my life.

In the middle of Silicon Valley, because the physical and psychological conditions they are in are so acute, there are almost no unhoused people who are not under the influence of hard drugs. The ground is full of syringes; there are people having sex openly in the streets, or fighting with the void. Some have burn marks; most are covered in wounds, bruises, and dirt. Thousands of people cast outside capitalism appear almost as an image of what the system can do to you if you do not continue to remain inside it. This scene is also a mirror reflecting the most frightening nightmares of passersby.

After coming from a place like Turkey, where every social group is somehow protected by small-scale structures of society such as municipalities, family, and neighbors, witnessing this contradiction became the greatest reason I shut down all my senses. So much so that this tension, for a long time, destroyed the bridge between my body and my mind, leaving me unable to process emotion.

In some situations, as a consequence of living in modern society, I know that I cannot open my body and heart to every experience, and that such defense mechanisms may in fact be useful. But as I see this state of disconnection shaping masses of people more deeply through technology, I cannot help worrying about the future. Because the street and the culture of the street are reflected directly in innovation, invention, and art, and this numbed state on the street spreads to thousands of technology workers like me.

Elon Musk, appearing at the White House in recent weeks in a state some described as ketamine-related, is in fact an embodied photograph of this separation. In front of the X building he purchased, the same picture of homelessness and "not being there," the same disorder, is present every day.

In fact, since the 1960s, hippie culture and psychoactive substances have been among the most important forces shaping the creativity behind technological development. For many visionaries, from Steve Jobs to Bill Gates, psychedelic and LSD experiences influenced the technologies they designed from beginning to end. But in those periods, because technology did not advance as rapidly as it does today, ideas and visions could be integrated into society through the right regulations and steps.

Today, however, CEOs who cannot solve the homelessness problem on their own streets have set their eyes on space. The basic reason is that the integration and filtering of ideas into society depends on a process of slowing down and metabolizing. Especially after the digitization and increase in data brought by COVID-19, it is not easy for either companies or state institutions to keep up with this speed.

Every day, dozens of rapidly consumed thoughts are followed by new ones before the previous ones can be fully internalized or digested. This causes us to receive our share of countless technologies released into the market before they have matured. The ideas we collect like collectors, and the experiences we acquire, are driving all of us toward a form of mental hoarding, making us even more disconnected from our bodies.

On top of all this, artificial intelligence now processes the ideas we accumulate on our behalf. In other words, the mental processes that would lighten the load in our minds are also being deactivated.

As a yoga teacher, I observe this disconnection every day at the physiological level as well: while blood is pumped toward the head, our feet become numb.

That is why lately, whenever my mind becomes too busy and starts producing thoughts, I press my feet into the ground while feeling my heart. Even though the feeling of alienation continues, that black mass dissolves only this way.

I think this is exactly the way to understand technology and notice what it is doing to us: not by collecting new ideas, but by digesting the experiences we already have, individually and collectively. By using our insight as a compass, we can integrate these ideas into our own lives and into society at the proper scale. There is no need to be against technology. Bringing it down from the heavens to the ground, regulating it at our own rhythm, and using questioning as a tool of synchronization seems to be the most valid path at both the micro and macro scale.



*Illustration generated with GPT-4 / DALL-E 3*