Jan 29ᵗʰ, 2020

Nadia told me about a performance artist who was big in the 80's named Tehching Hsieh. Hsieh completed a series of 1-year challenges: he spent a year living outside in New York City; he spent a year tied to his friend, Linda Montano, but they were never allowed to touch; and he spent a year in a cage without speaking, reading, listening to the radio, or engaging with any media. His year long performances provoked people to consider their lives differently. I don't think my time offline is anywhere near as deep or impressive as Hsieh's projects, but I like the idea that my internetless year can be thought of as a kind of performance art. It takes it beyond my experience and becomes about how it reads and what it means to others.

May 1ˢᵗ, 2020

As I thought about what I might tell them, I realized that I didn't know how I should frame my year offline. It's not just research, and it's not just for fun; it's partly performance art – meant to provoke critical reflection; it's partly a mental health intervention for myself – especially thinking about pace of life; it's partly activism – resisting and questioning the colonial, exploitative labour and ecological impacts of the internet; it's partly community building with the update letters I've been mailing out; so it's partly a platform that provides me opportunities to share ideas – a social media; and it's also partly something that I just felt like doing, something I can't rationalize.

Sept 23ʳᵈ, 2020

Trapeze

This is not a trial run.
Swinging netless,
I feel hands holding mine
as if I've never held hands:

my hands and theirs, a net,
my mind and theirs, a culture,
my computer and theirs, an internet.

The crowd tries.
Theirs is not a netless run.
Swinging, holding
hands that feel held,
a net of never hands:

my hands and theirs, a culture,
my mind and theirs, an internet.
my crowd is theirs.

Trying to run
netless, not swinging,
not holding hands,
not feeling held, never holding,
as if I'm a culture of hands:

my internet hands and theirs,
my crowd mind and theirs,
swinging netless—

The crowd soars.

Though this whole year offline has been a sort of performance, I've decided to end the year by broadcasting (or "live-streaming") my first 20 minutes online and you're all invited! I'm not planning anything special, except to use the internet of course, so it may be a tedious thing to watch. I won't decide what to do online ahead of time, but at some point in the broadcast I'll check my email. The thought of it makes me feel ill. That little bold number that shows how many unread messages I have is going to be overwhelming, although I doubt any of the emails waiting for me will be important…anymore. My guess is that, not including my spam folder, I'll have 613 emails in my main Gmail account. I'll also check the student email account I have with McGill. According to McGill's policies, students are expected to check this account regularly and are responsible for any missed communications. I refused to do that this year, and I'm still a registered McGill student…as far as I know. Tune in on January 1st to find out!

I don't know too much about broadcasting videos over the internet, so I bent my rules to ask for help setting up a live-stream. My friend Kory looked into alternatives to big tech streaming options for me. He's a research scientist who works for a tech firm. After asking around, Kory helped me understand why live-streaming is so expensive and complex. One of the people he asked suggested that I'll "have a hard time finding anything that's not either a giant company or a small company using a giant company on the back-end." He was right: four people I asked recommended a small streaming service called Jitsi. However, I found out that Jitsi defaults to streaming broadcasts over YouTube, which is owned by Google. I was hoping to avoid supporting YouTube as it's infamous for its algorithm that sensationalizes recommended videos in ways that push people to conspiracy theories and polarized positions. And, because its part of Google, doing anything over YouTube feeds one of the largest and sneakiest data repositories in big tech. (Look back to June's letter for why that should raise concerns.)

The other two live-streaming options that several friends suggested were Instagram Live and Twitch. They're both convenient and user-friendly. However, they're owned by Facebook and Amazon, respectively, and if I passively accept an internet coordinated by big tech, I'm helping to create the kind of web infrastructures that I've been critiquing all year. Besides the tracking and targeting, do you remember the sticker from Berlin that I included in my March letter? "Instagram is an ecological disaster." I still don't know if this referred to the energy used for Instagram's servers, how Instagram exposes vulnerable nature sites, or something else, but I'm still concerned. Also, as I wrote about last month, Instagram may pose mental health risks. A few weeks ago, CBC news recommended that people celebrating Thanksgiving alone (because of Covid) avoid using social media. They had a quote from an expert about how upsetting it could be to see other people getting together with their families for those spending the weekend alone. This was on the news!! They actually advised against people using social media. I agree that if you're feeling lonely, social media may exacerbate that feeling, but doesn't it also help people connect? Or is there consensus now that social media is more isolating than social?

The other big live-streaming option I didn't choose, Twitch, is mostly used by gamers. I don't know much about Twitch other than that it's owned by Amazon. Amazon is notorious for exploiting their workers and bankrupting smaller competitors. They also develop military technologies for the US government, including designing more aggressive surveillance tools to help ICE detain and deport undocumented migrants. (...Not to mention hosting ICE's servers.)

Instead of YouTube, Instagram Live, or Twitch I've settled on another big platform, but one that isn't owned by any of the big tech monopolies, a service that has facilitated some great things and some terrible ones: Twitter. Twitter can bring people news directly from primary sources but it can also provide a platform for people to assert their expertise even when they have none. I talked to lots of friends before making the decision to use Twitter and, besides all the false news, the two biggest issues I heard about Twitter were that (1) the platform uses targeted promotional tweets that aim to manipulate users and (2) the platform can amplify the comments of violent and hateful users.

(1) Thinking about Twitter's manipulative business model, I agree with my friends' critique. I've never been a Twitter user before but when James made me a profile for this performance – using just my phone number, without my name or email address – Twitter somehow knew who to suggest I might want to follow. And I'm not talking celebrities, I mean like personal friends of mine, people who are on this mailing list. I'm sure the kind of personalization and cross-company data sharing responsible for that little trick is pretty effective at managing my behaviours on their platform. However, now that I know how expensive and difficult it is to facilitate live-streaming, I guess I can't expect that Twitter is going to offer us the service without trying to get something from us in return. At least now we're on guard.

(2) As for the toxicity, I've heard that Twitter has started trying to make changes to address this and delete or flag some content while trying not to censor people unjustifiably. It's a difficult balance. They've been critical of Trump and flagged some of his false and racist posts. They've also pledged they'll try to delete all death threats. Twitter still has a long way to go, but critical users can help make sure it keeps moving in that direction. Critical tech use is about harm reduction; in an industry built on sweatshops, conflict materials, data-mining, and carbon emissions, it isn't possible to act very ethically. At least not yet.

To join the live-stream of my performance, go to Twitter and search for my profile. My Twitter name is Osher Lee. Osher is my Yiddish name, given to me by my bubby, and Lee is my middle name, after my dad's sister who died before I was born. Considering the inevitable technical difficulties, the broadcast may start a bit late, but you should be able to find the live-stream on my Twitter page or through their Periscope app. (Periscope is the name of Twitter's live-streaming app, but James checked and he's pretty sure you can watch directly from Twitter without downloading the app.) **Hope you can tune in on January 1st from 3-3:20 pm Montreal time. Just visit www.twitter.com/OsherL or search for "Osher Lee" on Twitter.**

Besides this live-stream and the letters you've been receiving, the other artifact that I am preparing to share from this offline project is my journal – the one you saw some excerpts from at the beginning of this letter and in some of my other letters earlier this year. After Covid began, I started journaling compulsively. Instead of a smartphone, I had my journal. In March and April alone, I wrote over 100 000 words. If I tried to compile a book out of the entire journal, it would be way too long. A couple of my friends have been generously sifting through it though and helping me figure out which parts I should share. Now I just need to find a publisher. If any of you know anyone who knows anyone, please let me know.

On the topic of journaling, for this month's challenge I am inviting you to try a mini simulation of what I've been experiencing this year. CHALLENGE 9: *Spend 24 hours offline, and journal about what you notice and how you feel.* If you manage to complete this challenge, I would love to read what you come up with. What happened? What did you miss? Was it difficult? What did you do afterwards? Even if you just want to complain about the frustrations or challenges that arose, I would love to hear from you. Any feedback you can share with me about this month's challenge will be especially helpful. When I start my research in high schools and support students as they investigate their relationships to the internet, I'm considering whether there could be value in asking them to attempt this challenge too. Inviting you all to spend 24 hours offline first will help me pilot the idea and figure out whether it could be a useful exercise to try with students. It's very different than spending a year without internet, but a shorter experience might be able to help people take something they thought about while offline and immediately integrate it into their everyday life online. We'll see!

It's hard to believe that this is the penultimate letter. I don't know if it was Covid, or if I'm just getting older, but did this year even happen!? I should be excited about going back online, but it feels like it's too soon. Who will read my rants in 2021? How will I get out of video calling obligations? And what if people start expecting me to be in-touch 24 hours a day!? It'll be tough to resist going back to my old ways, and it'll be even more difficult to figure out how to continue promoting friction without the excuse that I'm spending a year without internet. In a certain way, it's easier to go offline completely than to make small changes to our digital practices. But with a net of people to support us and help us figure things out, making changes can be just as possible. Is it too simple to say that we are the internet? That if we change, so will it? Maybe. But as the old Jewish saying goes, *it's not our job to complete the task, but neither are we free to give up on it.*

YT,
Aron

P.S. Mazel Tov to my brother Zale and his wife Caroline whose daughter Aria was born recently!! They are going to be amazing parents, and James and I are very excited to be uncles.

P.P.S. I'm going to mail out my last letter towards the end of December so I won't be sending another reminder about my performance on January 1st. Hope you can join me on the trapeze!!