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Paper 2

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1 hour 30 minutes

READ THESE INSTRUCTIONS FIRST

This insert contains the passage for Paper 2.

This document consists of **3** printed pages and **1** blank page.

Olivia Laing writes about loneliness in our modern age.

- 1 At the end of last winter, a gigantic billboard advertising Android, Google's operating system, appeared over Times Square in New York. In a lower-case sans serif font – corporate code for friendly – it declared: “be together. not the same.” This erratically punctuated mantra sums up the web's most magical proposition – its existence as a space in which no one need ever suffer the pang of loneliness, in which friendship, sex and love are never more than a click away, and difference is a source of glamour, not of shame. As with the city itself, the promise of the internet is contact. It seems to offer an antidote to loneliness, trumping even the most utopian urban environment by enabling strangers to develop relationships along shared lines of interest, no matter how shy or isolated they might be in their own physical lives. But proximity, as city dwellers know, does not necessarily mean intimacy. Access to other people is not by itself enough to dispel the gloom of internal isolation. 5
- 2 Loneliness can be most acute in a crowd. More than 70 years have passed since the American painter Edward Hopper produced the signature image of urban loneliness in his painting, *Nighthawks*, which depicts four people in a diner at night, cut off from the street outside by a curving glass window: a disquieting scene of disconnection and estrangement. Yet, its anxieties about connection have lost none of their relevance, though unease about the physical city has been superseded by fears over our new virtual public space, the internet. In the intervening years, we have entered into a world of screens that extends far beyond Hopper's unsettled vision. 15
- 3 Loneliness centres on the act of being seen. When a person is lonely, they long to be witnessed, accepted, desired, at the same time as becoming intensely wary of exposure. According to research carried out over the past decade at the University of Chicago, the feeling of loneliness triggers what psychologists call hypervigilance for social threat. In this state, which is entered into unknowingly, the individual becomes hyperalert to rejection, growing increasingly inclined to perceive social interactions as tinged with hostility or scorn. The result is a vicious circle of withdrawal, in which the lonely person becomes increasingly suspicious, intensifying their sense of isolation. 25
- 4 This is where online engagement seems to exercise its special charm. Hidden behind a computer screen, the lonely person has control. They can search for company without the danger of being revealed or found wanting. They can reach out or they can hide; they can lurk and they can show themselves, safe from the humiliation of face-to-face rejection. The screen acts as a kind of protective membrane, a scrim that allows invisibility and transformation. You can filter your image, concealing unattractive elements, and you can emerge enhanced: an online avatar designed to attract likes. But now a problem arises, for the contact this produces is not the same thing as intimacy. Curating a perfected self might win followers or Facebook friends, but it will not necessarily cure loneliness, since the cure for loneliness is not being looked at, but being seen and accepted as a whole person – ugly, unhappy and awkward, as well as radiant and selfie-ready. 35
- 5 The dissolution of the barrier between the public and the private, the sense of being surveilled and judged, extends far beyond human observers. We are also being watched by the very devices on which we make our broadcasts. As the artist and geographer Trevor Paglen recently said in the art magazine *Frieze*: “We are at the point (actually, probably long past) where the majority of the world's images are made by machines for machines.” In this environment of enforced transparency, the equivalent of the *Nighthawks* diner, almost everything we do, from shopping in a supermarket to posting a 40

photograph on Facebook, is mapped, and the gathered data used to predict, monetise, encourage or inhibit our future actions.

- 6 This growing entanglement of the corporate and social, this creeping sense of being tracked by invisible eyes, demands an increasing sophistication about what is said and where. The possibility of virulent judgment and rejection induces precisely the kind of hypervigilance and withdrawal that increases loneliness. With this has come the slowly dawning realisation that our digital traces will long outlive us. Faced with the knowledge that nothing we say, no matter how trivial or silly, will ever be completely erased, we find it hard to take the risks that togetherness entails. 50 55
- 7 All new technology generates a surge of anxious energy. Each one changes the rules of communication and rearranges the social order. Take the telephone for example - that miraculous device for dissolving distance. From the moment in April 1877 that the first line linked two phones in the Bell Telephone Company, it was perceived as an almost uncanny instrument, separating the voice from the body. At first, the phone swiftly came to be regarded as a lifeline, an antidote to loneliness, particularly for rural women who were stuck in farmhouses miles from family and friends. But gradually, fears about anonymity clung to the device. By opening a channel between the outside world and the domestic sphere, the telephone facilitated bad behaviour. From the very beginning, obscene callers targeted both strangers and the "hello girls" who worked the switchboards. People worried that germs might be transmitted down the lines, carried on human breath. They also worried about who might be lurking, invisibly eavesdropping on private conversations. The germs were a fantasy, but the listeners were real enough, be they operators or neighbours on shared telephone lines. 60 65 70
- 8 Anxiety also collected around the possibility for misunderstanding, with misgivings about how a device designed for talking might, in fact, make talking more difficult. If the telephone is a machine for sharing words, then the internet is a machine for constructing and sharing identities. In the internet era, anxieties about how technology has affected our ability to speak intimately to one another accelerate into terror about whether the boundaries between people have been destroyed altogether. 75
- 9 We are not as solid and tangible as we once thought. We are embodied but we are also networks, living inside machines and in other people's heads, memories and data streams. We are being watched and we do not have control. We long for contact and it makes us afraid. But as long as we are still capable of feeling and expressing vulnerability, intimacy stands a chance. 80

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