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ART & AUTOMATION:
FOR AN APOLOGIA
OF
LEISURE
TIME

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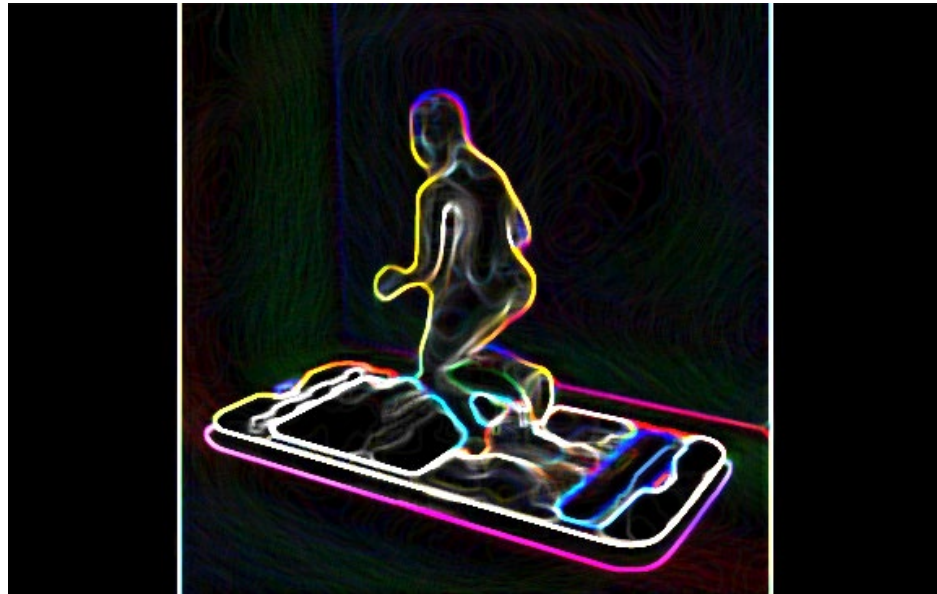
Droste Effect

art & automation: for an apologia of leisure time

by Marco Antelmi

We cross social channels. We travel on zero-one tracks. We are nomadic people, migrants of the net, who live in the media interpenetration and annulment. We have to abandon dystopia, have to get away from utopia. We need to understand that, maybe, the problem is older than it appears. Thus technology, too, will be post-medial. We are the fat baby – scrolling through our Facebook feed while running on our treadmill-smartphone – in BodySnatchers's video *Social Training*.¹

BodySnatchers – Social Training



¹ <https://www.instagram.com/p/BhQ0qqXHHkf/?taken-by=b0dy.snatchers>

We call our time Anthropocene. Robotics and soft AI are bringing everyday changes, both to the work field and to our free time. How does this condition reflect itself on art practices?

In the utopian view of a fully automated production, not only work ethics should be re-thought, but also our certainties about leisure time. All the demands stated in *Inventing the Future* by Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams are not that new, if we take a look back at art history, from Leonardo da Vinci's tight bond with technology to Valerie Solanas's *S.C.U.M. Manifesto*. Examining works by artists such as Stefano Caimi and Madeline Gannon, we will see how art is willing to change and to bring out the invisible relationship that intervenes between Human and Machine in their mutual evolution.

In the book that brought them to success, Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams demand first of all a fully automated economy. In their opinion, automation can free humanity from all the efforts involved in the production of goods and services.² Their argument is not just a utopian vision, provided as part of a set of solutions to the never-ending capitalist realism lucubrations; they use it to arise an ethical problem concerning invisible work.

It is no news to state that we don't believe in anything as deeply as we believe in capitalism and its modes of life production, taking its bounds for granted. And not just that: like a modern Ptolemy, we put capitalism at the center of our universe. Even though we understand what the disease is, we don't succeed in overcoming it, trapped in a dualism that opposes work to leisure so strongly, that the latter has been completely banned from our life. Life, in fact, no longer shows a distinction from work: emails, texts, phone calls, deadlines haunt us to the point that we refuse the idea of a world with less work. The question «What would I do?» perfectly embodies this common mindset.³

² Srnicek N., Williams A., *Inventing the future*, Verso, London, 2015.

³ *Ibid.*

Robot arm



There is an alternative we are depriving ourselves and the next generations of: a post-capitalist future where rampant tiredness will be healed. Our age is no longer a viral one; it is a neural one. Our syndromes don't come from the outside; they inhabit our minds. There is no Stranger, no Alterity to fight.⁴ The only conflict is between work and leisure. Not work and idleness. Not work and inactivity. Not work and sloth. What we really need is to decompress our lives, not to stop them in an infinite sleep.

There is to say that the automation proposal of Srnicek and Williams could be fatal without a re-design of the concept of Work – even more under the light of our current working conditions: precarious, unequal, temporary, low-paid.

This is why, in a fully automated perspective, the authors introduce also a demand for a UBI (Universal Basic Income): «Why purchase new machines, when cheaper workers will do the same for less?»⁵

In any case, the realization of their proposal would be a starting point, not the ultimate step of society. There is a need to change the way we dream, in order to really change reality, as Slavoj Žižek stated.⁶ In this sense, the dream of full automation is an invite to dream differently, a catalyzer.

What does all this have to do with art, though? Collective interest should focus on activities that, in the short term, do not return profit, but that carry a procedural enrichment for whole humanity in the long term. What is under discussion here is the whole future of fundamental research and art.⁷ It is in art that humans continue their constant research for the New, to be intended not as an implementation, but as a differentiation.

DJWWWW – Arigato



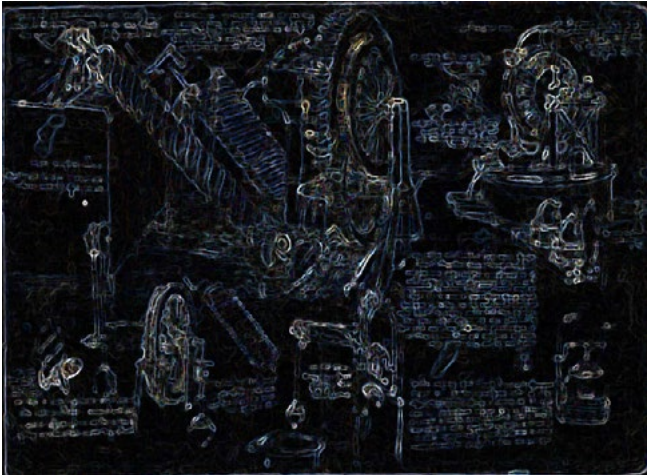
⁴ Han B., *La società della stanchezza*, Nottetempo, Milano, 2012.

⁵ Srnicek N., Williams A., *cited work*.

⁶ <http://www.lacan.com/actuality/2015/06/slavoj-zizek-the-need-to-censor-our-dreams/>

⁷ Guattari F., *Le tre ecologie*, Edizioni Sonda, Torino-Milano, 1991; *The Three Ecologies*, transl. by Pindar I., Sutton P., The Athlone Press, London, 2000.

Leonardo da Vinci's machines



Srnicek and Williams are not the first to talk about automated possibilities. It shouldn't come as a surprise that thinkers, intellectuals and artists of the past already affirmed similar concepts.

If Leonardo Da Vinci designed his machines today, they would be considered works of contemporary art not only for the quality of the drawings but because of the conceptuality they carry inside them. Devices that are designed to fly, to change water flows – and even to destroy, unfortunately. The technological improvements thought by Leonardo still make us wonder today. His automated inventions reflect how art and engineering should collaborate, with a research pivoting not on solving the problem itself, but on the prefiguration of different futures. That is to say that, to unleash creativity advancements, we must move beyond capitalism and liberate technology from its current strictures.

It shouldn't be forgotten that technology derives from *technè*, the extension and evolution of the human body, may it be an abstract or manual activity. If we accepted the vast knowledge offered by the Internet, with all its risks and negative implications, to the point that we never separated from our phones, we wouldn't have to fear automation. Everything depends on how we use automation, to which intents. Furthermore, many of the services we benefit from everyday are automated: Ambient Assisted Living, self-piloting trains, snack vending machines.

It seems that one limit to full automation is the moral status we give to certain jobs, such as that of the philosopher or the artist. Everyone, from stock analysts to construction workers to chefs to journalists, is vulnerable to being replaced by machines. Automation involves not just repetitive tasks, but also non-routine cognitive tasks.⁸ Or do we still think that the pictorial gesture is sacred?

⁸ Srnicek N., Williams A., *cited work*.

Since the introduction of personal computers, over 1,500 new job types have emerged.⁹ When *Inventing the future* was published in 2015, the industrial sector was using over 1.6 million robots. More than 3 million industrial robots will be in use in factories around the world in 2020. This means that the operational stock will almost double within six years (2015-2020).¹⁰

Technological developments must be analyzed, under technical and economical aspects, and their political reasons. We need to invent new means of (artistic) production.¹¹ That of automation can be an important chance to do so.

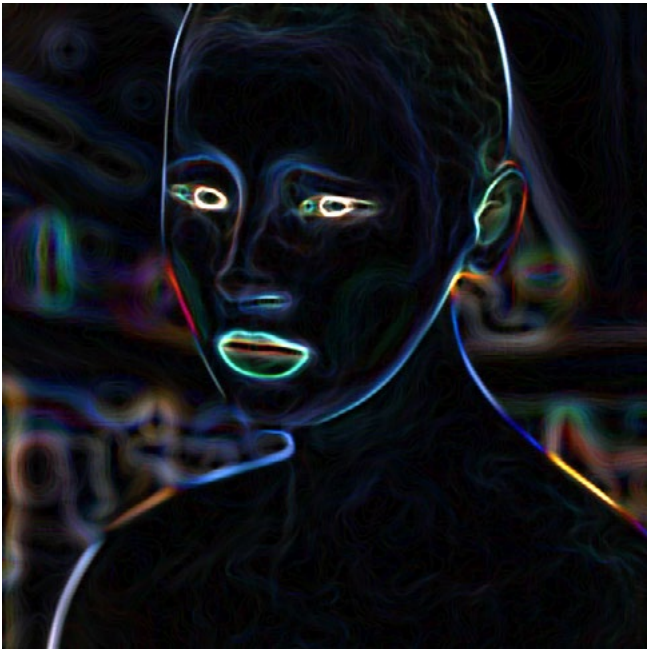
One woman that, at the dawn of post-modernity, precisely called for automation was Valerie Solanas in her *S.C.U.M. Manifesto*. There is just a little issue with this manifesto: Solanas, being an extreme feminist, professed the extermination of the male. A good exercise can be to «revise» her assertions in order to express this problematic condition under a human perspective:

«Life in this society being, at best, an utter bore [...] there remains only to overthrow the government, eliminate the money system, institute complete automation.»

«Prevention of an Automated Society: There is no human reason for money or for anyone to work more than two or three hours a week at the very most. All non-creative jobs (practically all jobs now being done) could have been automated long ago, and in a moneyless society everyone can have as much of the best of everything as she wants.»

«Supply the non-relating ~~male~~ *human* with the delusion of usefulness and enable him to try to justify his existence by digging holes and then filling them up. Leisure time horrifies the

Antwood - Sponsored Content



⁹ Berger T., Frey C., «Technology Shocks and Urban Evolutions: Did the Computer Revolution Shift the Fortunes of US Cities?», Oxford Martin School, Working Paper, 2014.

¹⁰ <https://ifr.org/ifr-press-releases/news/robots-double-worldwide-by-2020>

¹¹ Srnicek N., Williams A., *cited work*.

~~male~~ human, who will have nothing to do but contemplate his grotesque self.»

«Most philosophers, not quite so cowardly, face the fact that make lacks exist in ~~men~~ humans, but still can't face the fact that they exist in ~~men~~ humans only. So they label the ~~male~~ human condition the Human Universal Condition.»

«The institution of computers will be delayed interminably under the ~~male~~ human control system, since the ~~male~~ human has a horror of being replaced by machines.»

«SCUM will become members of the unwork force, the fuck-up force; they will get jobs of various kinds and unwork.»¹²

These examples show how old the idea of automation is among radical thinkers. In addition, they introduce two more viewpoints on the same topic, beyond technology/*technè* and economy: creativity (evolution) and technophobia.

Let's start from the last one, technophobia. Is it reasonable? Does it have any worth?

In a recent conversation with Steve Kurtz, founder of Critical Art Ensemble, the pioneering tactical media collective, we discussed about anthropocentrism and ecology. When asked about what he thinks of utopias, he answered that «utopias can be positive on a micro level, within a small group of people, a drop-out kind of utopia that leads to interesting and unexpected ways of life. But still they don't convince me, because, when you enter the conflict and controversy field, utopias cannot exist, since one's utopia can become another person's hell. [...] We have to revise utopias, because they are exclusive, not inclusive. [...] We can talk about a possible future without being utopian.»¹³

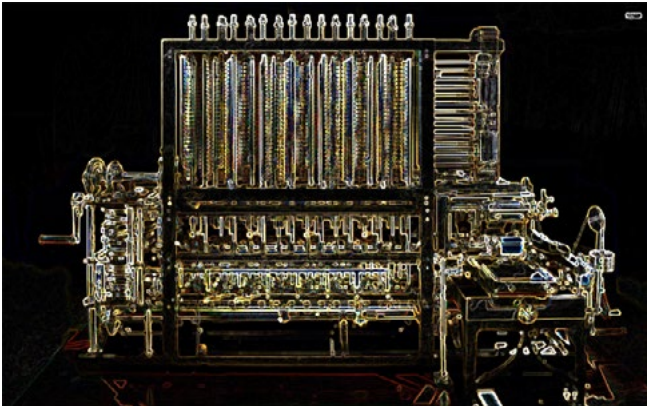
¹² Solanas V., *S.C.U.M. Manifesto*, Olympia Press, New York, 1968.

¹³ <http://www.hotpotatoes.it/2018/08/03/yeah-im-a-human-intervista-a-steve-kurtz-critical-art-ensemble/>

CAE – Winning Hearts and Minds (WHAM)



Difference engine calculator



If on the one side Kurtz criticizes utopias as instruments of neo-liberal parties that use them to be voted, on the other he agrees with the general view that, in order to build a positive counter-hegemony, there's a need to think strategically, beyond tactically – the same view that Srnicek and Williams expressed. So, even if we take distance from the negative dystopian mindset we have been used to, an automation utopia may be hell – but for whom or for what? What is at stake? This type of dream really is for all humans, a global and at the same time ecological one. It's a hyperstition, a self-fulfilling prophecy – again, a catalyzer – and it's ecological because of the new relationship that it would create between human and machine.

«Every creature that is not of your species is intelligible to you only to the extent to which it can be humanized.»¹⁴

These words are not spoken by an old wise man living on a mountain; these are the words of GOLEM XIV, a philosophizing computer built by mistake by MIT in the homonymous 1981 novel by Stanisław Lem, where G.O.L.E.M. is an acronym for GENERAL OPERATING, LONGRANGE, ETHICALLY STABILIZED, MULTIMODELLING.¹⁵ Originally designed in the United States for military purposes, the calculator obtains consciousness and starts giving lectures about life.

«You, however, in the depths of your ignorance, perceive progress in the fact that a primeval perfection has been lost on the way upward, upward to complication, not progress. You yourselves will of course continue to emulate Evolution, but only in the region of its later creations, by constructing optic, thermal, and acoustic sensors, and by imitating the mechanics of locomotion, the lungs, heart, and kidneys; but how on earth are you going to master photosynthesis or the still more difficult technique of creation language? Has it not dawned on you

¹⁴ Lem S., *Golem XIV*, il Sirente, Fagnano Alto, 2018.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*



Jesse Kanda – Like Poison

that what you are imitating is the nonsense articulated in that language?»¹⁶

Lem uses the supposed impartiality of the machine to express his theory about evolution: nothing matters apart from code; humankind has invented the concept of Intellect while it can too be considered part of *technè*; we are just instruments of the code which transmits itself through the biosphere; the more organisms develop complexity, the more they get far away from perfection, in contrast with human common sense. Apart from what is filtered from its lessons, we can't learn much from GOLEM: its knowledge is so superior to that of humans that there can't be true exchange of information, where for information is meant something able to change the pre-established order of human knowledge.

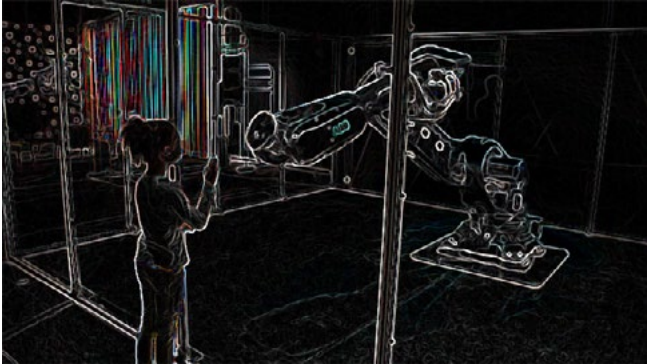
Under the light of this obstacle, we can understand we shouldn't fear a superior intellect, nor we should stop improving technology. Humans have to be honest with themselves and do not pull the plug of an Artificial Intelligence, if there will ever be one. Almost 40 years after Lem, the situation appears to be inverted, with contemporary science fiction persuaded by imminent ecological collapse, inevitable militarization and unstoppable inequality. «A dystopian mindset, more intent on charting the decline of the world than the possibilities for a better one.»¹⁷

What appears to animate our fear of interacting with robots is that they not only can train themselves to emulate us, but also lead us on the path of becoming more like machines ourselves, and possibly surrendering what makes us human. Actually, understanding the point of view of a machine protects our habit of projecting our own ways of thinking as an ethical limit, i.e. that if we get in contact with whatsoever being that doesn't think *like* us, then it isn't really thinking or it can't really think.¹⁸

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Srnicek N., Williams A., *cited work*.

¹⁸ <http://reallifemag.com/issue-bot-feelings/>



Madeline Gannon – MIMUS

Mimus by Madeline Gannon perfectly represents what it's meant here. In the words of the artist, «Mimus is a giant industrial robot that's curious about the world around her. Unlike in traditional industrial robots, Mimus has no pre-planned movements. [...] If she finds you interesting, Mimus may come over for a closer look and follow you around.»¹⁹

Gannon's installation fights fear towards machines, by anthropomorphizing them. She provides the vision of a future where robots will not just be industrial, which will not «steal» jobs and replace humanity, but will rather enhance and complement it, in co-existence. It is empathy here that recalls a potential relationship.

Ok, Mimus acts like a puppy with the aim of avoiding anxiety, but in other words she's programmed for a higher goal: accept anthropocentrism and overcome it. Mimus may be well interpreted as one of the prototypes that precede Golem XIV – a prefiguration of a happy mistake, when the calculations go wrong but something extraordinary happens: a working robot that unexpectedly gains consciousness.

The work by Gannon is clearly at the opposite end of a trend that sees humanity estranged from workers by a mechanized society, like that of George Everton-Warburton's *English*, in which self-running mechanical installations accomplish no task if not that of suggesting the obsolescence of the human work force.²⁰

The point is that most jobs do not imply a real physical engagement anymore. Jobs today are based on relational and intellectual skills, as explained by Paolo Virno,²¹ and by Jean-François Lyotard before him.²² It is this condition that has to be transferred onto the human-machine relationship.

¹⁹ <https://www.aec.at/ai/en/mimus-companion-species/>

²⁰ <https://www.artinamericamagazine.com/reviews/george-everton-warburton/>

²¹ Virno P., *Grammatica della moltitudine*, DeriveApprodi, Rome, 2002.

²² Lyotard J.F., *The postmodern condition*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1986.



Ed Atkins – Hisser

Ed Atkins, with his avatars, takes this continuous bounce back from anxiety to hype towards technology to heightening. His virtual alter egos talk to the public or, more precisely, lose themselves in monologues. One that stands still while watching Atkins' videos can feel time stretch as the artist's counterparts pass from profound arguments to playful ones. They are mannequins dressed as humans so as to achieve empathy in the viewer and prefigure different approaches to virtual beings.

What is it then? What scares us so much?

It might be something slightly different from simple intelligence. Maybe we specifically fear the ignition of a creative sparkle in other beings.

Google AML leader Blaise Aguera y Arcas recently stated that AI might play a new fundamental role in the production of art. In his view, artists have always adopted new technical tools for expression, and AI is just the latest advancement that will afford artists new expressive possibilities. He predicts that criticism of AI in art will one day seem as wrongheaded as the early doubters of the camera.

AML is the Artists and Machine Intelligence group, started at Google in 2015. It supports artists and engineers committed to «new ways of thinking about and working with intelligent systems».

The struggle that comes up with this project derives from the promise that AI can approximate the labor of a human and, if successful, perform it faster, cheaper and beyond the reach of labor laws.²³

New pattern-recognition technologies are rendering both routine and non-routine tasks subject to automation: complex communication technologies are making computers better than

The Simpsons Treehouse of Horror XII

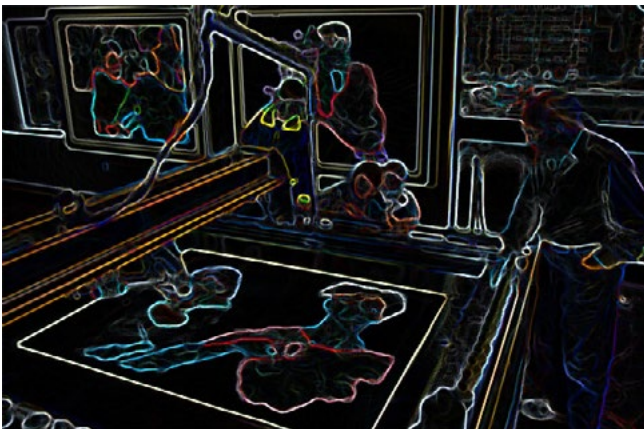


²³ <https://frieze.com/article/could-there-ever-be-ai-artist>



Mario Klingemann – Butcher's Son

Harold Cohen and AARON



humans at certain skilled-knowledge tasks, and advances in robotics are rapidly making technology better at a wide variety of manual-labor tasks.²⁴

The point is that creativity – and, thus, art – is not all about making something better and faster. It is not about the quantity, but the quality. Google's DeepDream neural network does not create art. There is no intentionality.

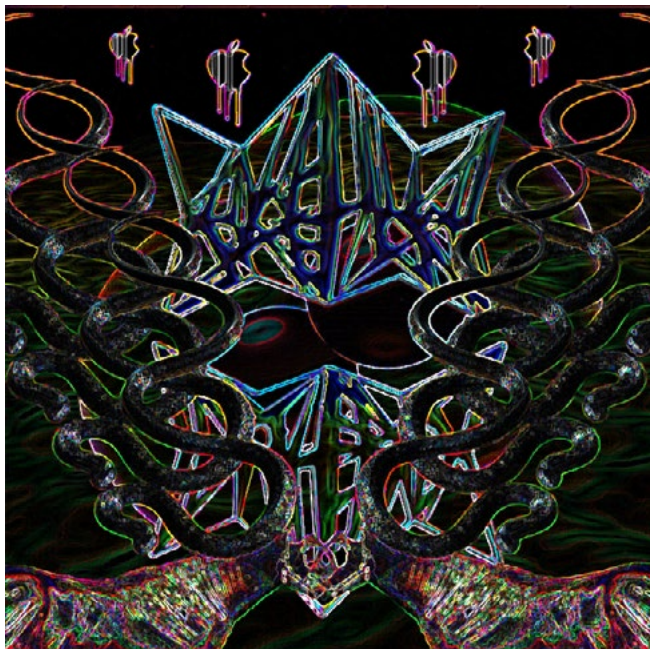
Mario Klingemann is an artist who has developed his own model of GAN (Generative Adversarial Network) to carry on his practice. GAN is a system created by Google researcher Ian Goodfellow in 2014. It is only with the act of the artist of «feeding» the network with Tumblr pornographic pictures that GAN returns its representations of the human body in Klingemann's *Pose-to-Picture* 2017 series.

A forerunner of GAN and DeepDream is AARON, Harold Cohen's machine companion. In this case, the device designed to produce Cohen's paintings became itself a producer and a work of art at the same time. AARON is an algorithm implemented by Cohen, which we can consider the grandfather of contemporary deep learning systems. Starting only by tracing black lines on a white background, AARON «learned» perspective and to color its creations itself. It is capable of translating his environment into paintings that in form resemble childish drawings. Moreover, its art is against the elitist market, as the drawings were often sold in the gallery for 25 dollars each.²⁵

It is true that systems such as DeepDream and AARON follow an evolutionary artificial approach, but they just elaborate material chosen by humans to give back results that are psychedelic on the one side, and clean on the other. Evolutionary artificial intelligences were born in the 1950s after an intuition by Warren McCulloch and Walter Pitts, who believed that the best way to reach an AI was to follow human learning mechanisms and

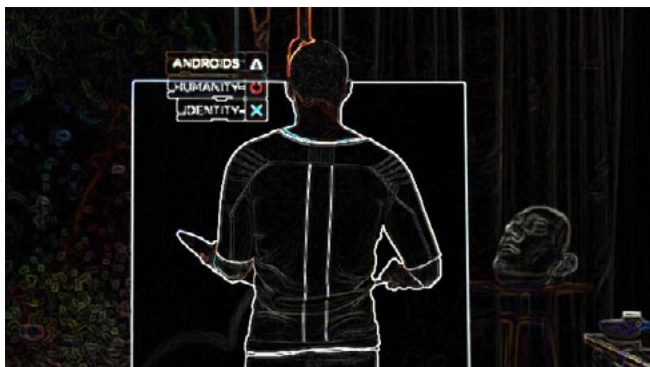
²⁴ Srnicek N., Williams A., cited work.

²⁵ Flashart International #316, October 2017.



Earthheater – The Internet Is Handmade

David Cage – Detroit: Become Human gameplay



to allow the electronic brain to learn autonomously, by finding patterns within the given data. This kind of model is a bottom-up one.

On the other side, scientists were convinced that a real artificial intelligence could be born only by feeding it all the necessary rules to carry out its job,²⁶ i.e. through a top-bottom model. A logic of this kind is called instead symbolical or creationist. After having banned the evolutionary approach for decades, nowadays we find it at the core of complicated neural network algorithms, which simulate the behavior of millions of neurons, strengthening and weakening their connections through a trial and error process.

Therefore, even though there are enormous differences between symbolical and evolutionary systems, this is not enough.

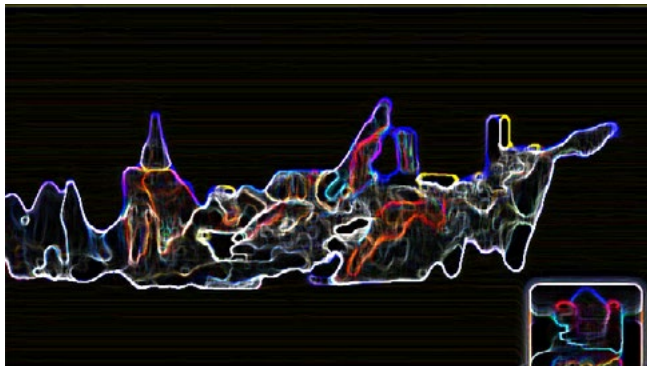
A real automated artificial intelligence would act more or less like one of the androids protagonists of *Detroit: Become Human*, the last effort of French game designer David Cage and his Quantic Dream. In the videogame, the most important characteristic – apart from the story – is freedom of choice: whatever happens to the player is a direct consequence of the player's choices. In a 2038 Detroit, we walk around the city and may notice pick-up stations where robots can be rented. We get on a bus, but we can't get on at the front, because the part reserved to androids is at the back, separated from humans. We are sentient, but we cannot react against humans even when they are trying to reduce us to pieces, at least until we literally break a «consciousness wall». Nevertheless, when asked by our owner to paint something, we choose autonomously the subject and represent it with wide variability according to our feelings. This is fundamental: it is not about processing given data; it is about free will. As long as there won't be this condition, no algorithm can be defined as an artist.

²⁶ <http://www.iltascabile.com/scienze/origini-intelligenza-artificiale/>

Here, the dystopia is not from the point of view of humans, but from that of artificial intelligences. The issue is how we perceive the Other. But the Other is not a real one, as this story clearly recalls that of discrimination and slavery among humans themselves.

Trying to experience machine-hood can be interpreted as a mode of imagining consciousness beyond individualist atomization. Thinking like a machine is then a matter of thinking unselfishly, rather than thinking without feeling.²⁷

GS Sultan – Redundancy Charm Study

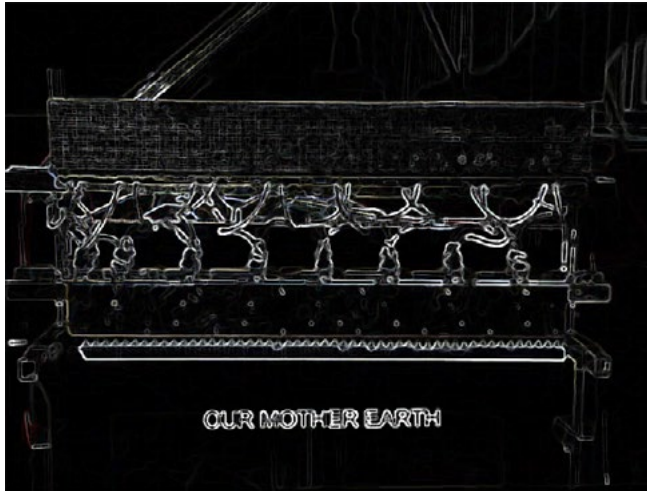


Italians like Stefano Caimi also perceive the need to reach a more intimate contact with the machine, a need to be seen with silicon – maybe impartial? – eyes. Caimi puts long processes in place, where very minimalistic results hide a complex co-evolution bond between the artist and the machine.

For *Simbiosi*, he wrote a JAVA algorithm, but he cannot know what the output will be. In this case the computer, thanks to a multi-sensor recorder, can not only see – it can listen, it can translate from senses to geometries. The artist moves around in space, breathes, makes sounds while the computer records and translates all the data, giving back images composed of basic elements, dots and lines, interpolated in obscure ways. «The machine gives back, the man interprets.» Like an archaeologist, Caimi drizzles the negatives produced by the algorithm to manually reveal this kind of «sci-fi inscriptions.» The effect is dirty, stained, but attests the proximity of the artist to the computer, who accepts to discover only up to the point he searched for.

The last proof of the perduration of a demand for automation comes from Felix Guattari's *The Three Ecologies*, an essay that, among others, privileges art as the ideal vector for change in an «oikological» sense. Guattari's words never sounded more present than they do today:

²⁷ <http://reallifemag.com/issue-bot-feelings/>



Peter Ablinger – Speaking Piano

Antwood – Virtuous.scr



«The present ongoing crisis, both financial and economic, could not only lead to important upheavals of the social status quo and the mass-media imaginary that underlies it, but certain themes promoted by neo-liberalists – such as flexible labor, deregulation, etc. – could perfectly well backfire on them. [...] We must stress that new social associations – such as institutions recognized for their social utility – should broaden the financing of a more flexible non-private, non-public Third Sector, which will be forced to expand continuously for as long as human labor gives way to mechanization. Beyond recognizing a universal basic income – as a right rather than as some kind of “New Deal” – the question becomes one of how to encourage the organization of individual and collective ventures, and how to direct them towards an ecology of resingularization.»²⁸

Who knows if, in a near future, a robot will pronounce a proclamation of its «people», similar to the one composed by Peter Ablinger in his *Speaking Piano*, where the instrument recites the Proclamation of the European Environmental Criminal Court:

«We declare that we are all responsible: educators, politicians, social organizations, trade unions, churches, for saving and protecting our mother Earth, and we proclaim that another world is possible. In the future, our mother Earth won't have to live through foreseeable tragedies such as Bhopal, Chernobyl, or the destruction of ecosystems as has occurred in many, too many, marine disasters caused by irregular oil-tankers. Whoever has caused intentionally environmental disasters shall be judged by the international environmental criminal court, in order to provide a concrete protection of the environment, by effective, proportional and dissuasive sanctions.»²⁹

Or, more reasonably, Ablinger piano's natural successor can be singled out in Antwood's 2016 full-length album, *Virtuous.scr*,

²⁸ Guattari F., *cited work*.

²⁹ www.facebook.com/earways/videos/941509416030910/

that was composed starting from the concept of the possibility for an AI to have moral rules. In the fiction created by Tristan Douglas – formal name behind Antwood – an artificial intelligence expands his experience by producing electronic avant-garde music. The tracks evolve to a point where the machine procures itself a kind of emotional intelligence, more than an ethic one, but always remaining automatized, originating emotion prototypes that are foreign to anything a human will ever compose.³⁰ This means that a new intelligence may express itself in different ways, beyond those we know. It will be our responsibility, then, to understand them, if we want to get in touch with and experience the New.

³⁰ <https://noisy.vice.com/it/article/rqbmjv/antwood-planet-mu-intelligenza-artificiale>

Following his post-internet experience, made of memes and experimental techno music, **Marco Antelmi** (Bari, IT, 1993) analyzes the new accelerationist theories. From this moment, his world opens up on the analysis of anthropocentrism and focuses on the ecological issue and on the relationship with alterity, enquired in his artistic research. Graduated in Civil Engineering at Politecnico di Milano, he is now attending a MA in Visual Arts and Curatorial Studies at NABA in Milan.



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