Robopoetics

"Robopoetics" is a web-based exhibition that takes place at http://robopoetics.com, that calls attention to a form of contemporary digital poetics, developed out of the possibilities of computational and web-based mediums. Through play, imagination and experimentation, the exhibition aims to shed light on the infrastructure and ideology of contemporary information technology from media archaeological and post-digital perspectives. "Robopoetics" features commissioned artworks from six contemporary artists, including Annabell Lee Chin (SE), Victoria Durnak (NO), Caspar Forsberg (SE), Kirke Meng (DK), Audun Mortensen (NO) and Carl-Johan Rosén (SE).

Introduction

In recent decades information technology has impacted and created major changes in both written and spoken language. Since the foundation of all information technology infrastructure consists of programming languages built from code, it could be said that one of the greatest contemporary challenges therefore is techno-linguistic. Our language itself, our interhuman mode of communication, has become the object of capitalist exploitation on a global scale. As philosopher Giorgio Agamben puts it in "Marginal Notes on the Comments on the Society of the Spectacle (2)": "[…] in the society of the spectacle it is this very communicativity, this generic essence itself (that is, language as *Gattungswesen*), that is being separated in an autonomous sphere. What prevents communication is communicability itself; human beings are kept separate by what unites them."[1]. This erosion of linguistic community has meant that people are separated by the very thing that unites them: communication.

This exploitation of our linguistic communication is achieved through processes of automation, for which opaque algorithms and artificial intelligence have been developed in order to generate economic profit, symbolic capital or otherwise. As theoretician Franco "Bifo" Berardi has noted, if language learning at an early age is provided primarily through software (designed by global capital) rather than through the mother/parent, there's a risk that this will create a discontinuity in – and have unpredictable consequences for – the emotional and empathetic experience of humanity in the future[2]. Technology in itself *is not* and *can* never be neutral. Author and researcher Safiya Umoja highlights this in her study of Google's search engine, where she considers how its algorithms amplify discrimination, prejudice and racism, since the search engine results are determined primarily based on economic interests, which, according to Umoja, lead to algorithmic oppression of already marginalised groups[3].

Another deeply problematic aspect of contemporary information technology is surveillance. Given the *ongoing process* of data-collection, its abundance, circulation and acceleration, extracted from both our private and public communication, whether we want it or not, the fact that our data is being collected, means we are by default profitable. At the moment

it's simply enough to *participate* in order to reproduce the capitalist agenda. According to theoretician Jonathan Crary et al, this 24/7 surveillance society threatens our ability even to dream of another communal life[4] and risks destroying our imaginative ability altogether[5].

Because of its glut of information, we often regard the Internet as infinite, but on the contrary, says theoretician Boris Groys, the Internet foundations are *finite*, since every event on the Internet is a preprogrammed operation with a final destination. All of these events can be tracked and recorded, which means that the Internet is in its essence a surveillance machine[6], and as the art collective Metahaven has pointed out, "every transaction on a Google server is an event under American jurisdiction."[7]

This recording of what we see and read is clearly distinguishable from offline contemplation, since there, contemplation *leaves no trace*. When, as happens in contemporary information technology, contemplation becomes a measurable, saleable good like any other, there is a risk that our ontological autonomous position of subjectivity may collapse[8].

As a result of the monopolisation, capitalisation and surveillance in recent decades of the social and cultural Internet-based platforms where culture is produced, distributed and experienced, the dominant global tech companies i.e. Google, Facebook etc could be said to have been handed responsibility for our shared cultural heritage[9].

In addition, the major scandals around big data companies and organisations both in private and public sectors (Cambridge Analytica[10], NSA[11], to name a few), whose criminal activity is often revealed by now well-known whistleblowers, reveal that the centralisation of power by global tech companies and organisations - and their opaque structure[12] - is a very real threat to democracy and human rights.

The research leading up to "Robopoetics" has resulted in a *toolkit* of concepts that may be useful in studying the current technological–linguistic situation:

> • Technization, meaning that technology is always in an ongoing process of disappearing, i.e. becoming normalised to such an extent that it is invisible to users and thus risks ending up outside critical discourse[13].

> • Media archaeology, meaning that all cultural creation is associated with material media. The concept has been discussed by media theorist Wolfgang Ernst, among others. In the context of information technology, the concept underscores that our global digital environments would not be possible without the foundation of their material infrastructure, including labour, working hours and natural resources[14]. In literature, a media archaeological perspective might point out the conditions under which we write, as author and researcher Mara Lee describes here: "Anybody who has ever written knows that if the way we write changes, if the technology for

transmitting information and communication is altered, it also alters the contents of the message."[15]

• Post-digital, a concept describing the contemporary trend towards a return from purely digital expression to a kind of physical, self-organising culture in which the digital and the analogue interact. Historian Rasmus Fleischer sums it up thusly: "The concept of the post-digital does not signify a new stage of history, but rather a maturing of the digital experience that allows us once again to emphasise [physical] presence." Or, in other words: "The potential to form bonds of friendship through digital communication is enormous, but it is only in the post-digital do such friendships *occur*"[16] (my italics). This post-digital state, in which we see presence and being-together in a new light, shows that the physical body and the physical encounter with another are inseparable from our understanding of the contemporary digital experience.

Given contemporary information technology's structural problems and technization, there's a need for initiatives that overthrow the computational linguistic power structure from the inside. We need a contemporary, problematising critique of automation – one that explores "the material and technological conditions for *poiesis*[17] (i.e. making with the goal of discovering something new) – while problematising the constant temptation to naturalise representations and forms of communication"[18] as literary scholar Jesper Olsson has put it. In light of the privatisation of the Internet and the monopolisation and diminution of our shared cultural heritage, there is a growing need for independent, non-profit, web-based exhibitions, platforms and meeting places for the production, distribution and contemplation of culture. The idea is for "Robopoetics" to be *one* such initiative.

- Roger von Reybekiel, Stockholm, November 2018

---

[1] Giorgio Agamben, "Marginal Notes on the Comments on the Society of the Spectacle (2)", (https://1000littlehammers.files.wordpress.com/2010/02/agamben-marginal_notes_on_comments.pdf, 1990), p. 8.

[2] "[…] the generations that have learnt more words from a machine than from their mother […] the disappearance of the mother and the consequent break between the learning of language and affectivity." Franco "Bifo" Berardi, Precarious Rhapsody (London: Minor Compositions, 2009), p. 9.

[3] "On one level, the everyday racism and commentary on the web is an abhorrent thing in itself, which has been detailed by others; but it is entirely different with the corporate platform vis-à-vis an algorithmically crafted web search that offers up racism and sexism as the first results. This process reflects a corporate logic of either willful neglect or a profit imperative that makes money from racism and sexism." Safiya Umoja Noble, Algorithms of Oppression (New York: NYU Press, 2018), p. 5.

[4] "Within 24/7 capitalism, a sociality outside of individual self-interest becomes inexorably depleted, and the interhuman basis of public space is made irrelevant to one's fantasmatic digital insularity." Jonathan Crary, 24/7 – Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep (London/New York: Verso, 2013), p. 89.

[5] "The function of imagination is at stake. The establishment of the Matrix is arranged by cognitive cabling, the automation of learning, memorization, and language." Franco "Bifo" Bernard, from the essay "The Next Game, Play Recapturing the Radical Imagination" (Stockholm: Art and Theory, 2013), p. 34.

[6] "The Internet is by its essence a machine of surveillance. It divides the flow of data into small, traceable and reversible operations, and thus exposes every user to its surveillance – real or possible." Boris Groys, Into the Flow (London/New York: Verso, 2016), p. 178.

[7] Metahaven, The Internet Doesn't Exist, (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2015) p. 250.

[8] "In offline reality, the act of contemplation leaves no trace – it is, actually, an empirical correlation to the traditional ontological construction of the subject as not belonging to the material world, not being a part of it. But on the Internet, an act of contemplation does leave traces. And that is the blow that finally destroys the ontological autonomy of the subject." Boris Groys, Into the Flow (London/New York: Verso, 2016), p. 185.

[9] "Driven by profit, not the public interest, they [the major global Internet corporations] have become custodians of our collective [cultural] heritage." Astra Taylor, The People's Platform, (London: The Fourth Estate, 2014), p. 149.

[10] https://www.theguardian.com/news/series/cambridge-analytica-files

[11] https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/the-nsa-files

[12] "[…] rising economic inequality, the breakdown of the nation-state and the militarisation of borders, totalising global surveillance and the curtailment of individual freedoms, the triumph of transnational corporations and neurocognitive capitalism, the rise of far-right groups and nativist ideologies, and the degradation of the natural environment. None of these are the direct result of novel technologies, but all of them are the product of a general inability to perceive the wider, networked effects of individual and corporate actions accelerated by opaque, technologically augmented complexity." James Bridle, New Dark Age: Technology and the End of the Future (London/New York: Verso, 2018), p. 131.

[13] English translation of Hans Blumenberg's concept of "Technisierung", from an essay by Hannes Bajohr, Publishing as Artistic Practice, (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2016), p. 103.

[14] "Our global digital networks would not exist without the planet's minerals and energy, without exploiting nature as a resource…" Jesper Olsson, läsning – apparat – algoritm (Stockholm: OEI editör, 2016) p. 202, translated from Swedish original.

[15] Mara Lee, När andra skriver, (Göteborg: Glänta produktion, 2014) p. 117, translated from Swedish original.

[16] Rasmus Fleischer, Det postdigitala manifestet, (Stockholm: Ink Bokförlag, 2009) p. 45, p. 33, translation from Swedish original.

[17] Poiesis is the activity in which a person brings something into being that did not exist before, it's etymologically derived from the ancient Greek term ποιεῖν, which means "to make".

[18] Jesper Olsson, läsning – apparat – algoritm (Stockholm: OEI editör, 2016) p. 198, translation from Swedish original.