UNFITTING: ART AND LABOUR FROM CONCEPTUALISATION TO AI

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Artists' technical skills are not subject to the same temporal laws of productive labour as workers'.[1] This is because artists are not subject to the discipline of the value-form, as is the modern industrial and post-industrial worker. Artists do not produce their works according to the average production time for the completion of similar works throughout the art system and therefore are not involved in the production of value, and engaged in inter-enterprise (or inter-studio) competition, even if artworks are the outcome of generalized commodity production. That is, despite most artworks having little or no exchange value, they are nevertheless the result of the purchase of commodities and the purchase of commodity labour power in their fabrication, completion and installation. So, artworks are closer to "free labour" than they are to commodified labour, and as such, as I have argued since the publication of *The Intangibilities of Form* (2007), it is more philosophically accurate to refer to them as inefficient commodities, or more precisely *incomplete* commodities,[2] insofar as art commodites do not *fully* enter the money-commodity-money (M-C-M') relations of commodity production. Due to the fact that artworks fail to realize themselves socially as capital in the accumulation process, artists are freely able to determine the labour time they invest in their production. And this is what is meant by art as a form of free labour: there are no time constraints on the production of the artwork.

Thus if art is commodified "free labour"—that is, "free labour" that operates under and through the commodity system—artists cannot be subject to an *absolute process of deskilling*. Artisanal skills maybe stripped out of art production because of the technical transformation of practice, but this does not lead to the relative or absolute degradation of skills associated with machinic automation and routinization, which drives the implementation of socially necessary labour time. This radically changes how we assess the distinctions and overlaps between free artistic labour and productive labour. Whereas in the modern period the industrial labourer is subject to the substantive effects of labour process deskilling—as the artisanal integrity of labour is incorporated technically into the output of

machines, and manual skill is transformed into the facilitation and monitoring of machines and technical processes—artisanal deskilling in art becomes an opportunity for the formal and intellectual release of artistic authorship from the bounds of craft and traditional academic training. The normative identification between craft-based and academic descriptive skills and artistic value is no longer considered stable, and as such is subject to other evaluative criteria.[3]

In the twentieth century, the release of art from craft and academic skills was not just about the de-aestheticization of artistic judgement and the embracing of the expansion of art's formal and cognitive means, but the *radical deposition of the artist as sovereign creator*, and what this implies for artistic form and agency. This is why the complete breakdown of artisanal integrity in art in the first two decades of the 20th century is seen by the avant-garde as a positive and critical re-grounding of artistic skill and art's ideation, or, as we know it today, *conceptualization as making*. For this generation of artists, deskilling was also double-edged. It certainly separated the artist from craft skills as the foundation of artistic value, but as a result it released art into a realm of making-as-conceptualization in which medium-based disciplines were now manifestly subordinate to the multidimensional, interdisciplinary, and post-authorial materialization of art as idea and process. Following conceptual art in the 1960s, this formal and cognitive expansion was crucial to the emergence of work by women, black artists and artists of colour, insofar as these artists were no longer bound by gender-essentialist and race-essentialist accounts of craft-skill and tradition, and thus were able to invest in, and transform, the received ideational content of processes and materials as part of a wider exposure of the hidden association between certain artisanal skills and traditions, and white, male, preferment and status. Hence, my key argument in *The Intangibilities of Form*: from Marcel Duchamp and Constructivism onwards, traditional or craft-based skills, artistic deskilling, and re-skilling, are subject to a negative dialectic, in which the detachment and dissociation of the artist from traditional artisanal practices enabled a new range of skills, subjectivities and critical knowledges to rush into the space of art, initiating a process or sequence of *re*skilling. The negation of form, tradition, cognition, authorship was a pathway to new material ideations. Yet, as I also make clear, this negative dialectic was not thereby an invitation to artists to positivize their skills following art's completed assimilation into the technological realm or technosystem of mature capitalism in light of digitalization, as though artists were now bona fide collaborators

with tech researchers and scientists. Today, artists may be technicians, critical monteurs, ideas-and-resources managers, assembleists, project directors and coordinators, performative pedagogues and social collaborators, but this does not mean that they are now best placed to become laboratory workers, commercial project managers and willing collaborators with the market democracy demands of the culture industries. Thus, significantly, my proposed dialectic does not achieve its ends through *re*skilling, as such. Reskilling—in a further dialectical move—has to be sensitive to the problems that arise with the appropriation of conceptual artistic skills as part of the capitalist social project, and the ongoing blurring of the distinction between artistic technical skills and commercial, digital technical skills, identifiable with the social regeneration scheme, aesthetic corporate "makeover" under the auspices of cultural diversity, environmental platform, or commercial internet project. Reskilling as a post-humanist expansion of technique beyond the artisanal may release the artist from the tedium of craft and the "expressive hand," but in many instances, such techniques have become interchangeable with capitalist "general social (digital) technique." Therefore, the critical priority on which I insist, here, is to refuse to facilitate this proposed comfortable fit between reskilling and neo-liberalism's utilitarian willingness to adapt artists' desire to be socially useful to the interests of capital. Consequently, this is where *de*skilling re-enters the picture, insofar as one of the key critical horizons that artists face today is how to make their new skills critically *unfit* for this process of assimilation, as a refusal of art's solicitation by capital as democracy's "little helper," while at the same times pursuing a thorough-going technical relationship with the advanced technosystem, as a condition of sustaining art's critical legibility, a process we might call art's continuing avant-garde dis-accommodation and self-reflexive treatment of its own skill base.

The preceeding double-articulatation of new skills in art has become increasingly significant, with the arrival of advanced and culturally integrated systems of digitalization, and the further incorporation of AI into the labour process and cultural production. Indeed, these changes radically shift the terms of this discussion, establishing a new set of constraints and recalibrations in relation to the skill-deskilling-reskilling dialectic, and therefore, more crucially, inflating a new scepticism about the idea of expressive labour in art.

AI AND LABOUR

One of the distinguishing features of the debate on art technology over the last 30 years has been the increasing recognition that art and digital technologies present a new field of technical transformation of art and the extension of the "non-artistic" technical skills of the artist. The art and technology duality that still had a powerful Romantic revenance until the emergence of conceptual art, has now been thoroughly dismantled, with the formal and technical incorporation of the artist into the technosystem. In this sense, the technological absorption of the artist is part of a larger set of changes in the advanced occidental economies over the last 50 years: the completed assimilation of labour, artistic practices, and libidinal and subjective relations under the advance of real subsumption—or more precisely, the abstract social domination of the value-form. Advanced capitalism is distinguished not just by class domination at the point of production, and the exploitation of waged and non-waged labour, but also by the domination of the abstract forces of valorization, as a general system of impersonal control that affects everyone. In this sense, real subsumption is the abstract means by which the "rationality" of market relations and commodity production are reproduced, and the subjective and cultural investment in the "naturalization" of capitalist relations sustained.[4] By extension, neoliberalism is the global governmental form of this process of social mediation and rationalization, in an epoch of increased technological domination of the subject, and the libidinal production of subjectivation.[5] This is why the new tech industries, as the vanguard of new forms of labour exploitation and new forms of subjectivation, represent a fundamental qualitative shift in the nature of real subsumption, as AI, financialization and digitalization shape a new and global political and economic interconnection between the technosystem and the abstract domination of the value process. We now live in a world where the relationship between technology and technique simultaneously reaches into the labour process and the subjectivity of the producer, consumer, and citizen, as the necessary entelechy of science and capitalist reason, re-fetishizing a technocratic solutionism (algorithmic efficiency) to all economic, social, and cultural problems.

Over the last 20 years, this has yielded a vast amount of literature on the radical left, concerning what we might call the "epistemic closures," pathologies, and techniques of domination of the new technosystem (broadly, the analysis of these techniques of domination is based on the critique of the structural separation of

computational reason from critical reason, famously exemplified by Chris Anderson's article "The End of Theory: The Data Deluge Makes the Scientific Method Obsolete," in *Wired* in 2008).[6] AI and computational reason, as the would-be evolutionary and utilitarian reason for greater efficiency, personal fulfilment, and market transparency, are systematized in the literature as a vast expansion of the coercive and consensual power of technocratic hegemony. Indeed, the global and totalizing ambitions of the tech industries as the vanguard of finance capital are seen as the aggressive alignment of computational reason with the assumed impotentiality of humans, that is, capital's increasing rationalization of workers' labour as a formal adjunct to machine intelligence. Hence, the widespread confidence of the tech-corporate justification of technological augmentation and replacement of labour under the neoliberal vision of a post-work world. The new tech ideologues defend labour recombination and technological progress as the rational *enhancer* of labour and human capacity. And this is where corporate tech agendas intersect with transhumanism (the radical technological extension of human capacity), and posthumanism (the technological divergence of future humans from the biologically determined). Digital technology has not just fully integrated labour, thought and consumption into the technical relations and decision-making processes of the technosystem, but has radically opened up the body and consciousness to technological augmentation and transformation. It is important to clarify what kind of capitalism, and what kind of world of augmentation, we are now entering.

BIG DATA AND *JOUISSANCE*

The explosion of computational reason in the form of AI, and the arrival of big data as a constitutive and determining part of labour discipline, logistics, scientific research, transport, consumer choice and cultural production, represents a fundamental restructuring of relative surplus value extraction, daily cognitive processes and modes of attention and the role of statistics in scientific research. In short, the development of algorithmic systems is not the logical emendation of technical efficiency as such, but a systematic attempt to restructure knowledge and action in the interests of statistical probability and the greater "forward-thinking rationality" of market relations. Indeed, as Justin Joque argues, statistics and capitalism are more than accidental partners.[7] The algorithmic alignment of statistical probability with the use of big data paradoxically seeks to "de-rationalize" and subjectivize claims to knowledge. Statistical processing is not driven by frequentist, long-run calculations of

probability, but by Bayesian-type, short-term estimations of probable outcome, based on the reduction in the number of discrete experiments and the expansion of hypotheses, in the hope that the vast amount of data produced by supercomputers will bring about possible unexpected correlations between hypotheses and data. This enables two things: the rapid automation of research processes, and the acceleration of the market's exploitation and manipulation of knowledge as a "making-efficient" of scientific hypotheses through access to vast number crunching, as opposed to linking data to exhaustive experimentation and exacting causal analysis. Thus, under big data, scientific research becomes a continual updating of hypotheses in the light of new data, meaning that evidence is never wrong, so to speak, only provisional, and therefore research can be constantly amended without any external authoritative, judgement.[8] In fact, at these numerical data-levels, no independent causal-critical human scientific assessment of data can enter the research process, because, faced with the vast amounts of data, it is only other computers that can realistically assess the data. Human, non-machinic scientific judgement becomes not just superfluous, but irrelevant. This creates a destructive paradox. The displacement of human judgement internal to the assessment of research outcomes as a result of the expansion of automative objectivity, subjectivizes knowledge production as the fashioning of truths from contingencies. This means that what appears to work in the moment, in the short-term, is invariably given rational priority.

The above-mentioned Bayesian subjective revolution in computation underlies the three familiar epistemic/technical drivers of the neoliberal technosystem's identification of data trawling with the production and exchange of popular knowledge, and the use of digital technologies as sources of interactive pleasure: 1) the advocacy of knowledge production as a form of pragmatic and speculative associationism, or apophenia, wherein meaning is derived from finding possible correlations hidden in a mass of disconnected texts—one of the digital enablers of conspiracy theories;[9] 2) the use of algorithmic feedback processes derived from internet users, to establish patterns of connection and contiguity that encourage consumers to follow the already known, already liked, already accepted, as a reinforcement of the consumer's self-curation of difference, what Wendy Chun and others have called homophily, a constant remaking and love of the familiar;[10] 3) the general metaphysical inflation of associationism and correlationism as the democratic basis of a "common creativity," in AI image programmes

such as CloudPainter and DeepDream, which fetishize the machine-learning combination of a huge range of images dragged from image banks, to produce phantasmatic interfusions of everyday visual materials. All three models of text and image interaction privilege either a phenomenology of the "unexpected association" or the iteration of a pregiven association, above causal analysis, critical taxonomies, and historical context, as the basis for a creativity of "common sensing" as a kind of flux and popular intuition-through-immersion. As Hito Steyerl has said of this machine-learning "common sensing": "patterns represent a new kind of mathematical truth emerging out of petabytes of spam by means of secret algorithms. They mysteriously pop up from an overkill of random data…,"[11] reinforcing and expanding the libidinal release of online users and "creatives" from accountability to sources and the need contextual justification.

This everyday cultural loosening of causality and context, in the name of scientific speculation or aesthetic pleasure, does not dissolve the scientific demands of causation, context and taxonomy, or the efficacy of critical reason. Science has not surrendered its non-utilitarian and anti-consequentialist commitments—nor has critical theory—just as capitalist production is not run by "associationism" or the metaphysics of compossibility. But generally, these shifts do weaken scientific method under the pressure and the interests of market rationality and corporate funders, and reinforce the oligarchic tech consolidation of automation and technological augmentation as a short-cut to profits, strengthening the hegemonic construction of AI as the would-be evolutionary adaptation of producers and consumers to rational efficiency and the speculative possibilities of computational reason. At stake is the way tech companies and capital use the adaptative and coercive forces of financial hegemonic power to reconstruct the cultural uses of technical systems in its own rationally cynical interests. Capital does not want to be held up by "public interest" and the contextual demands of science's social debt to critical reason.

Thus it can be said that computational reason's fundamental drive to technologically automate and augment generates two integrated poles of hegemonic social control in the creation of the present technosystem: *aestheticist*, as just noted, (the automated diffusion of data online, as a space where *surplus jouissance* materializes and new libidinal attachments continually flourish), and *rational-coercive* (the increasing tracking, monitoring and assessment of workers

across an increasing range of occupations, in order to connect all aspects of the labour process to data analysis). Both involve an acceptance of machine augmentation as an irreversible, rational extension and facilitation of the libidinal body and labouring body. In *Augmented Exploitation: Artificial Intelligence, Automation and Work* (2021), Phoebe V. Moore outlines how, just as online prosumers are expected to be tracked and monitored through their libidinal attachments as consumers, "workers are now expected not only for all intents and purposes to be controlled and managed by machines portrayed as universally reliable calculators, but also potentially mimic and learn from them, rather than the other way round."[12] Indeed, for some workers in some occupations, this kind of external and "invisible" monitoring is rationally preferable to transparent self-monitoring, because it creates the calming illusion that no direct control is being exerted, and that the technology is simply neutral, and the employer is being fair and judicious.[13] In turn, this gives a libidinal-aestheticist twist to rational-coercive tracking systems, such as Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP), (which gathers masses of worker data that are used by the monitoring company and other companies to set the parameters of socially necessary labour time in a given sector) insofar as under these conditions, some workers believe it is best to passively accept the technology, because they feel it reduces the at-work anxiety that invariably accompanies self-monitoring, for the technology appears to assess levels of proficiency and efficiency for all without favour. In other words, such real-time monitoring contributes to a rational acceptance of tracking workers' productivity, given that it provides a moderate increase in pleasure. And this is precisely why the aestheticist pole and the rational-coercive pole in the new mode of technologically-augmented production in digital capitalism overlap: the associative pleasures of apophenia and contiguous pleasures of "the same" online, releases the user from the demands of critical reason, and the coercive tracking of workers' production and performance is aesthetically interiorized, and coerciveness suppressed by trusting in the technology's neutral invisibility. Both sets of users use adaptative modes of cognitive and physical labour as a way to survive and adjust to conditions of constraint.

But, of course, the pessimistic and would-be passive acceptance of technological systems, and reinforcement of the would-be self-evident rationality of the technological is the very thing that Science and Technology Studies (STS), new labour process theory, contemporary critical theory, and the philosophy of technology and design

all fundamentally contest. Indeed, what this corpus of writing draws attention to, is how the realignment of technology and the human, technology and labour, technology and consumption, and technology and art, is never as predetermined in its rational functions and outcomes as its designers and capital assume. This has generated a widespread technophilia on the left, in relation to late capitalist technologies and neoliberal technocracy, in which the relationship between the machine, its operating script and its network of users is always open, despite the structures that shape and delimit its possibilities. This position is derived in part from Gilbert Simondon, Don Ihde, Bruno Latour and Michel Foucault. Indicative is Simondon's thinking in *On the Mode of Existence of Technical Objects* (1958), one of the earliest texts to break with a Heideggerian separation of *poiesis* from technology, and to reconnect technology to creativity and *re*-worlding, as opposed, in late Romanticism and Heidegger, to the idea of technology as a *de*-worlding of our experience of things:

> the true nature of man is not to be a tool bearer – and thus a competitor of the machine, but man's nature is that of the inventor of technical and living objects capable of resolving problems of compatibility between machines within an ensemble; he coordinates and organizes their mutual relation at the level of machines, between machines… he is the agent and translator of information from machine to machine, intervening within the margin of indeterminacy harbored by the open machine's way of functioning.[14]

For Simondon, machines are always ensembles of parts and functions that are never self-identical. They are always subject to possible reassembly, redesign, recoding, subversion, extension, and therefore, the human-machine interface can never be wholly subject to the dominative functions of the imposed rationality of the "capitalist machine," as such. This position, allied expressly to Latour-type actor theory that incorporates the idea of "open machines" into a network of human and non-human relations, and to a Foucauldian immanent critique of power, has become the basis of a technosystem constructivism. Technology and its objects and relations cannot, and never can, fully impose a proprietorial and fully dominative relationship between machines and users; in principle, the functions of technology are always technically open and indeterminate, and therefore amenable to challenging the instrumental imperatives of capital.

CONSTRUCTIVISM(S)

Two constructivisms derive from this confrontation with technological determinism: a *critical constructivism*, and a *technist constructivism*. The first is identifiable with STS and post-Adornian critical theory, and best represented by the work of Andrew Feenberg, the latter is identifiable with Latourian actor theory and liberal democratic interventionism, and with the work of Peter-Paul Verbeek. Both positions converge, however, in their use of Foucault's ideas as key to an immanent approach to the uses and possibilities of technology: that freedom emerges from the constraints of power, but freedom must exist *before* power is exerted.[15] In this, they both emphasize that humanist accounts of freedom as identifiable with the curtailment of technology must be rejected outright. On the contrary, technology is the domain in which the extension of human potentiality is to be ensured, despite technology's present forms of domination. For Feenberg, this is to be achieved through the efforts of popular intervention into the development of technologies in alliance with progressive designers and technicians; for Verbeek this is to be achieved through a similar process of popular consultation, but with a greater emphasis on the ethical mediation of technological outcomes through extended feedback from users and designers. Feenberg's position is directly indebted to a techno-productive critical theory, and positions the popular readaptation and development of technology as part of an anti-occidental and anti-imperialist Global South critique of positivistic accounts of Western scientific progress; Verbeek's places his efforts, in contrast, in the direction of a sanguine Latourian faith in democratic market self-governance.[16] Feenberg argues, "Progress is now defined in terms of designs and innovations that include populations previously excluded by formally biased designs, or that realize hitherto excluded human potentialities, or that successfully reconcile technical requirements with natural limits."[17] Verbeek insists, "the art of living in a technological culture is not about setting limits to the influence of technology but about shaping our own mediated subjectivity by developing responsible forms of technology design and use…[an] important requisite [of this] is developing an adequate basis for having public debates about technology and the good life."[18]

This kind of social-design Foucauldianism has also been particularly influential in new writing on computational reason and digital culture. In *Weapons of Math Destruction: How Big Data Increases Inequality and Threatens Democracy* (2016), Cathy O'Neil emphasizes the need to reprogramme "better values," as she calls them,

into algorithms,[19] just as in *The Black Technical Object: On Machine Learning and the Aspiration of Being Black* (2022), Ramon Amaro allies Frantz Fanon with Foucault, to confront the implicit racist assumptions of machine learning algorithms and everyday online transactions. We need, he says, to "rebuild a new relation between the Black psyche and technology, which might constitute possible avenues toward the psychic liberation of racial alienation,"[20] as a means of moving beyond what he calls racial representation. Now, of course, there is an immediate *technical* imperative in confronting racism and other forms of exclusion and misrepresentation online, given how new technologies work in the interests of racial profiling, and reinforcing the conscious and unconscious racial exclusion of a Europeanized, racialized capitalism. The critique of technology has to have a primary technical component, to challenge communication technology's racialized "scripts." Similarly, the pursuit of an immanent critique of technology rids the criticism of technology from the mournful sentiments of classical critical theory, perhaps best exemplified by Günther Anders' notion of our technological culture generating a promethean shame and impotence experienced by users of technology, in response to technology's apparent overwhelming power,[21] and the contemporary posthumanist version of this, the increasing sense of impotence and the diminution of human capacity that people feel in the face of the abstract efficiency of digital reason, analysed by Claire Colebrook in *The Death of the PostHuman* (2014).[22] But critical constructivism and technist constructivism's call for a popular actionism and citizen science, so to speak, seems overwhelmingly invested in the enlightenment nostrum that technology itself can solve the social and political problems that follow in its wake. Revealingly, in Verbeek's *Moralizing Technology* there is no mention of technology and political economy and the exploitation of labour, just as in Feenberg's work, there is limited discussion of socio-technological critique and the exploitation of labour. This has a lot to do with the way they have inherited Foucault's invidious separation of ethics and politics from the centralizing dynamic of the exploitation of labour. "[It] is not a question of aiming for political power or the economic system," Foucault infamously declared in the late 1970s.[23] Self-change or group change, he insisted, can come about without class confrontation, and confrontation with capital's centripetal control of investment and distribution.[24] For Foucault and his techno-social heirs, it is the localized invention of other norms and ways of life that will prepare the ground for "progressive change." However, capital has no problem adjusting its "ethical vision," as long as this readjust-

ment does not weaken its autonomous capacity for action. The only thing that truly worries capital is that its control over investment is maintained, and the organization of the exploitation of labour remains stable. Indeed, this is the essential technocratic mandate of neoliberalism, and its tightening of the relations between state, market, and economy. Foucault's idealist expectations of neoliberal democracy theoretically dissolve these, providing a sanguine political cover for a change-through-technology position to work within capitalism.[25]

But this does not mean that some version of constructivism is not the best option for the critique of technological determinism, humanist pacification, and shame in front of technology, and the possibility of popular intervention into the technosystem. I broadly adhere to the constructivist position, then, in the sense that my critique of constructivism is in the spirit of a *better* or dialectical constructivism, one not built simply on an ethical or counter-technical challenge to technological domination. Technicians, programmers, and tech workers have to operate within the constraints of the technosystem, and accordingly, act where they can, to adjust and confront its limitations (in alliance with digital and non-digital labour). This means that there is no place for *anti*-technological sentiments in the struggle over the functions of technology and its direction. This is what remains crucial in critical constructivism, and to lesser extent in technist constructivism; indeed, this link is what loosely provides a progressive cultural bloc against anti-technological revanchism. But the idea that a Simondonian-type underdeterminist approach to technology alone can provide a viable space for negotiation with capital is a fantasy. The assumption that radical designers, planners, and artists can walk into tech corporations and hedge funds as "collaborators" is a mystification of what technology under capital accumulation serves. Neoliberal governance is designed precisely to prevent the amelioration-through-underdetermination of these conditions of exploitation, through violence if necessary; and the vast expansion of the use of big data throughout the capitalist system organizes and shapes this outcome. So, where exactly might a counter-algorithmic programme successfully begin to tackle the scale and structural power of this domination and intrusion? Well, in an absolute sense, this is unanswerable within the present proprietary constraints of AI; professional and non-professional participants in "citizen science" alone cannot *redesign* their way out of these confines. But, nevertheless, art's link to strategies of counter-design can contribute to a broad programme of

countercultural rationalization, in which art's relative freedom from value relations can play a crucial, speculative, non-compliant, experimental and transformative role, that, as Alain Badiou puts it, in a recent discussion of contemporary art, is able to "dis-place" the "frontier between the possible and the impossible."[26]

AI, ART, AND "UNFITTING"

To return to my opening discussion, from the perspective of artists, and art and art's relationship to free labour, it would be fundamentally incorrect to simply identify art with the technical readaptation of the dominant functions of technological efficiency and libidinal exploitation. Artists may of necessity draw on and develop advanced technical skills, and as such become allies of those who work–under powerful constraints–to redesign technological systems in the interests of equality of use, access and democracy, but they are not technicians in the pay of the capitalist project and the techno-system–without, that is, dissolving the efficacy of their critical labour, and therefore without ignoring or diminishing art's negatively deficient contribution to the production of value and the commodity form. For to do otherwise in the radical or cynical name of art's post-autonomy and the tech-professions' assimilation of art's technical use-values into the capitalist project, is to forfeit the semi-autonomous function of art as free labour. Indeed, it is to deny art's immanent capacity to step away from and withdraw from socially necessary labour time as a condition of *not* entering the capitalist project paradigm, and therefore not making art useful for "market democracy." But usefulness comes in many forms, some far better than others.

In my book, *Art, Misuse and Technology: Micheál O'Connell's "System Interference"* (2022),[27] which presents an overarching of view of art, AI and digitalization, through a discussion of the work of the Irish artist Micheál O'Connell, I began to outline what an alternate usefulness might be under the expanded AI conditions of the technosystem. How might art find a rationality compatible with this new technical domain, while resisting the Foucauldian adaptation of cultural agency to technical solutions and the subordination of art's praxis to "knowledge fetishism": the collaboration between artists and hackers and software technicians in the cognitive mapping of the inter-objective and intersubjective pathways of the new tech universe. This can only reduce the artist's functions to a dispiriting counter-hegemonic version of big data research–the artist-as-researcher driven by the prospect of the discovery of hidden

correlations. In the end, this can lead only to art's death by sublimity–that is, artists' acceptance of an overwhelming sense of futility and impotence, when compelled to immerse themselves in the inexorable opacity of technical systems. One of the problems confronted by artists, consequently, who follow the counter-surveillance paradigm of an artist such as Trevor Paglen, is opening art's conceptualization and agency to the kind of hypertrophic inertia that large-scale cognitive mapping produces.[28] But this inertia through expanded scale is precisely what the algorithmic systems are designed to generate: namely, the power of these systems to capture and impress on users the inevitable and necessary rationality of the algorithmic management of work tasks.

The point, is: both artistic and labour-activist full "reverse engineering" immersion into the technosystem as the basis for counter-surveillence of discrete systems, is to put oneself at the disposal of the data-postivistic demands of the technosystem itself. The prioritization of art and politics as numbers. This is reflected in the current activist response to the extensive data trails that many workers now produce on a daily basis in the workplace, particularly delivery workers and office workers. Workers are being encouraged by unions and activists–and this foregrounds where technological thresholds of adaptation to micro-control and resistance presently lie–to engage in *sousveillance* or self-surveillance, to provide a self-tracking pool of information that can collectively counter the huge asymmetry in workplace knowledge between powerful tracking systems, such as Enterprise Resource Planning, and workers. Tech researchers Marta E. Cecchinato, Sandy J.J. Gould and Frederick Harry Pitts have argued that this will enable workers "to better understand their work, potentially as a basis to organise and bargain."[29] *Sousveillance* is an important strategy in the workplace, social activism and artistic practice, given how it addresses and confronts the self-rationalization of technical systems (as in O'Connell's work), but invariably, whatever micro-political advantages and empirical advocacy this brings, the systemization of this strategy will be conducted on big data's terms and its inflationary positivization and hypostatization of evidence as a way of settling disputes. As such, artists' and activists' actions, struggles and horizons should not be *defined* by the technical parameters of digital technologies.

This conflict is the great cultural dividing line of our time. Where does the artist, and activist and artist-activist position himself or

herself in relation to these processes? What are the limits of immanent critique? But, more crucially, what are the productive possibilities of negative sociability? To where does the artist withdraw, technically and artistically, to defend his or her autonomy, and with what, exactly? How can negative strategies and non-aesthetic distanciation continue to mediate knowledge and the artist's technical involvement in advanced technological systems and relations, without accepting docile and generalist assessments of technology? To return to my opening comments, artists must make of what they know and what they do in relation to the technosystem essentially *unfit* for adaptation, as a means of dis-accommodating the self-rationalizing entelechy of occidental technological evolution and progress. There are many approaches to this problem of negative sociability and questioning the meaning of technological progress, many ways of facilitating and pursuing dis-accommodation. Some of these approaches affirm experimental modes of alternate technologies and science, and draw on counter-capitalist ecologies: the artist becomes researcher and technician, even if he or she avoids subjecting their research to the professional scientific research programme. We might call this the artist-based "citizen science" option: artist-technicians, technicians, scientists, eco-activists, cultural activists, and non-professionals work together. Nevertheless, such artist-technicians are caught in the quandary of whether they should actually *build* things, objects, systems, models, templates, in collaboration with scientists, which might provide an open and non-dominative encounter with technical systems, an alternate world of imaginary or possible objects. In this respect, this position highlights a view of the artist that is based on the idea of research and self-reflection, which was widespread in the traditional view of the laboratory scientist before the advance of big data and collective para-scientific modes of scientific research: the scientist as individual creator. But inevitably, to seriously pursue this alternate model, rather than simply engage in DIY techno-scientific tinkering, is to embark on a process of extra-artistic retraining and complete the passage from artist-as-technician to actual *artist-technician* (again, opening art to a fixed idea of reskilling that breaks with the skill-deskilling-reskilling dialectic; indeed, it needs to be said here that the negative dialectic of art and labour is rigorously non-identitary and non-linear). And again, the temptation to stabilize art's use-values in some utilitarian bid for practical relevance is to close off what art does best under capitalism, in its displacement of the frontier between the possible and impossible: *deflate and disorganize capitalism's claims to reason, as a condition of art's radical and*

privileged contribution to a non-dominative and transindividual account of labour, value and emancipation. In other words, art's special autonomist dispensation is clear enough: to *use reason to critique reason*, and the only way to do this is by upholding art's anomalous identity as an incomplete or inefficient form of labour. This is why, in these terms, unfitting and dis-accommodation come before making art useful—in whatever "progressive" way—to a democratically truncated, deeply repressive, neoliberal technocracy. For art to continue to embed itself in the negative dialectic—of skill-deskilling-reskilling and *deskilling*—is to challenge the self-rationalization of technology and market democracy through strategies of *misuse*, as a means of foregrounding the contingency of technological systems, and therefore questioning the self-proclaimed rationality of these systems. Yet, pursuing strategies of misuse to make art unfit for the role that capitalism expects of it in these terms, is not about "inner migration," absolute negation or anti-representation, or indeed expecting the artist and his or her collaborators to carry forward subaltern knowledges as kind of transcendental vision, but about a resolute confrontation with the metaphysical claims of technology-as-progress. Art's negative sociability has to capture collective emancipatory energies that point to a realm of values that is recognisably *not* capitalist. And one way of doing this is by "acting out"—through humour, grotesquery, irony, technical and cognitive inversion, "intelligent stupidity"—as a means of introducing a *critical finitude* (that is, not a passive and self-satisfied humanist finitude) into the heart of digital capitalism's oppressive sublimity and technological inevitablism, by devising different, non-utilitarian uses of, and modes of inhabitation internal to the techno-social order. In this sense, above all, the artist needs a sense of comedic displacement and a commitment to the productiveness of insufficiency, to move the skill-deskilling-reskilling-actively-deskilling dialectic forward. "Unfitting," therefore, as a reflection on the contingencies of technology should never come at the expense of the development of artists' technical competences and knowledge, for the artist cannot afford to be left behind technically, if he or she wants to make the denaturalization of the meaning of skill pay. The artist cannot be a generalist. As such, deflation and knowledge, critique and reason, are indivisible.

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13 See Beatriz Casas González, "Automated and Autonomous? Technologies Mediating the Exertion and Perception of Labour Control," in *Augmented Exploitation: Artificial Intelligence, Automation and Work*, eds. Phoebe V. Moore and Jamie Woodcock (London: Pluto Press, London, 2021), 96-97.
14 Gilbert Simondon, *On the Mode of Existence of Technical Objects* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017[1958]), xvi.
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