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Vectoral Agents : Power in the Age of Planetary Computation

Markelj, J.; Celis Bueno, C.

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Vectoral Agents

Power in the Age of Planetary Computation

1. Machinic Subjects: On the Political Technology of (In)dividuality <i>Jernej Markelj and Claudio Celis Bueno</i>	1
2. AI Agents and Post-consumerist Subjectivity <i>Rob Horning</i>	13
3. AI Art and the Foreclosure of Ecological Agency <i>Martin Zeilinger and Deniz Johns</i>	21
4. The Domesday Generation <i>Eryk Salvaggio</i>	32
5. All too Human? AI and the Paradoxes of Anthropocentrism <i>Sara Baranzoni</i>	41
Biographies	50

Edited by Jernej Markelj
& Claudio Celis Bueno

Machinic Subjects: On the Political Technology of (In)dividuality

JERNEJ MARKELJ AND CLAUDIO CELIS BUENO

MACHINIC
SUBJECTS: ON THE
POLITICAL
TECHNOLOGY OF
(IN)DIVIDUALITY

It has taken centuries for Western thought to slowly come to grips with the idea that humans might not be the sovereign agents who rule over the passive and inert nonhuman world. Persistent philosophical, artistic, and environmental appeals were needed to convey the urgency of moving away from anthropocentric frameworks that grant agency exclusively to humans and disregard the agential forces of technical systems but also of animals and inorganic matter. Yet, even in the time when the systems of planetary computation and their circuits of datafication seem to be shaping our sociality to fit their patterns, the production and reproduction of human exceptionalism persists with unrelenting stubbornness. Our legal, social, and economic structures continue to exercise power by distributing responsibility and merit following an anthropocentric worldview, insistently addressing us as self-determined sovereign agents. Humans are elected for office or sent to prison on account of their freely-made decisions; wages and profit are attributed based on human intentional effort; authorship remains the domain of human *creatio ex nihilo*. The operations of our increasingly complex, all-pervasive and active technologies remain outside of the anthropocentric worldview of these institutions that govern us. And yet, these enduring anthropocentric vestiges preclude an easy transition to seeing agential forces in terms that do not succumb to human exceptionalism. The liberal production of individual autonomy, with its assumptions of sovereign decision, intention, and will, keeps on sustaining concrete power relations that need to be accounted for.

The aim of this collected volume is to engage with the emerging power dynamics dictated by planetary computational networks without losing sight of the political consequences of the anthropocentric modes of governing. These political techniques operate by personalizing the outcomes that emerge from the interaction of human (both conscious and unconscious), technological, ecological, and other agential forces. These anthropocentric mechanisms of attribution endure even as machine

JERNEJ MARKELJ
& CLAUDIO CELIS
BUENO

learning algorithms are delegated with more and more tasks, and the capacities that were historically considered signs of human exceptionalism become increasingly less persuasive. Composing a song, making a managerial or moral decision, or providing emotional support can now be outsourced to an algorithmically-powered machine. These relatively recent but widespread operations are based on large-scale statistical aggregations in which pattern recognition is being deployed to manage individuals as pure data points and vectorial movements. As these procedures distribute authority, profit and privilege in ways that sometimes completely bypass human subjectivity, they throw into crisis the established human-centered ways of comprehending the relations between technology, individuals, and power. What is being challenged are not only the traditional schemes through which technological systems have been understood and governed, but also the ways in which human freedom and sovereignty have been constructed. To productively engage with this motley mixture of persistent anthropocentric structures and emerging nonhuman forces, we are convinced that attention needs to be paid to both mechanisms of power: the production of autonomous individuals and the governance of distributed data points.

The humanist fantasy of individual autonomy has indeed been thoroughly dismantled from all sides. In his oft-cited conclusion of *The Order of Things*, for instance, Foucault anticipates the decline of a certain kind of (epistemological) humanism, which is, he points out, ‘an invention of recent date’.¹ If the modern episteme, the framework of knowledge grounded in the idea of fixed human nature, would be disrupted, ‘then one can certainly wager that man would be erased, like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea’.² ‘The death of man’ projected by Foucault envisions the displacement or overcoming of the idea of the individual as described to us by the human sciences. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault attacks a slightly different kind of humanism, the one promoted by the liberal dreams of Enlightenment thinkers. ‘The general juridical form that guaranteed a system of rights that were egalitarian in principle’, he claims, ‘was supported by these tiny, everyday, physical mechanisms, by all those systems of micro-power that are essentially non-egalitarian and asymmetrical that we call the discipline’.³ According to Foucault, Modernity doubles the idea of an autonomous individual, the bearer of rights and responsibilities, with an inconspicuous regime of

1 Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things*, Milton Park: Routledge, 2005, p. 422.

2 Ibid.

3 Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, New York: Vintage Books, 1995, p. 222.

disciplinary institutions (schools, prisons, factories, etc.). While the official Enlightenment discourse speaks the language of rights, freedom and equality, these disciplinary institutions—the dark underside of this discourse—effectively constitute us by repeatedly measuring our conduct against the enforced norms. In this way, the individual ‘whom we are invited to free, is already in himself the effect of a subjection more profound than himself’: this subjectivity, constituted through internalizing the norm, is itself ‘the effect and instrument of a political anatomy’.⁴

This disciplinary society, which churns out docile subjects and, to add insult to injury, addresses them as free and self-determined, is said to be on its way out too. Under the pressure of networked technologies and advanced capitalism, the enclosed spaces of disciplinary institutions and the figure of sovereign individuals that ground them, supposedly find themselves in a ‘general breakdown’.⁵ And yet, in spite of this alleged crisis and all other ‘Copernican traumas’ and ‘cyborgizations’ that undermine our belief in human exceptionalism, ‘the conceptual gravity of the humanist illusion not only persists, but seems to draw some dark nourishment from these’.⁶ Through this persisting idea of the autonomous self produced by disciplinary institutions, ‘the individual sees his poetic reflection everywhere, including in the positions configured for it as *User* of the systems on which it is dependent’.⁷ Our profiles and feeds continue to interpellate us as active users, sovereign agents fully in control of our inert technological systems, even when a simple act of scrolling is conditioned by your own digital footprint, practically infinite data harvested from other users, intricate algorithmic infrastructures, energy-thirsty data centers, content moderators in the Global South, battery lithium from mines in Chile or Zimbabwe, etc. The user, then, finds themselves at the junction of the promises of individual autonomy and the agential vectors of planetary computation. This double bind is not an easy thing to navigate: it is no wonder that ‘people think the 5G cell towers are melting the boundaries of their egos’.⁸

Despite the centuries of disciplinary institutions at the service of social subjection, there is no denying that technologies of

4 Ibid., p. 30.

5 Gilles Deleuze, ‘Postscript on control societies’, *Negotiations: 1972–1990*, New York: Columbia UP, 1995, pp.: 177–182: 178.

6 Benjamin Bratton, *The stack: On software and sovereignty*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT press, 2016, p. 252.

7 Ibid.

8 Benjamin Bratton, *The revenge of the real: Politics for a post-pandemic world*, London: Verso, 2021.

JERNEJ MARKELJ
& CLAUDIO CELIS
BUENO

datafication are paving the way for new, more impersonal forms of social control. Compared to disciplinary power whose functioning can be summed up by the scene of interpellating an individual as *subject* and *subjected* to social authority (a state institution issues a “hey you!” and we, the well trained citizens crossing the road, turn to acknowledge our accountability), the computational politics of control operate at a qualitatively different scale. ‘Imagine the policeman standing there trying to yell: “hey you!” at every single one of [the 414 trillion bits, the approximate amount of data traveling the internet per second]’, suggests Hito Steyerl.⁹ ‘It must be flabbergasting. On top of that he has to figure out whether they are sent by a spam bot, a trader, a porn website, a solar flare, Daesh, your mum, or what’.¹⁰ Cue machine learning algorithms, which are able to process large quantities of data to seek out patterns and correlations. These patterns aren’t simply discovered, but—just like subjectivities normalized by disciplinary power—*produced*, which makes pattern recognition, Steyerl claims, ‘a fundamental political operation’.¹¹ The processed data is then used locally to construct online identities of users, or sold in bulk to programmatic ad intermediaries, government agencies, or AI companies that use them to train the next AI model.

The user data that is fed back into the platforms to fuel their recommendation systems, search engines, and large language models reveals a new logic of governing. Unlike the more or less stable normative identities policed by disciplines, the algorithmic identities leveraged by platforms are fluid and constantly evolving. If the 19th century homosexual (or the 21st century nudes-leaking ‘slut’¹²) is permanently attached to their identity by our institutions (and prudish morality)—becoming ‘a personage, a past, a case history, and a childhood, in addition to a type of life, a life form, and a morphology’¹³—then the forms of identity mobilized by digital platforms are innately malleable and anti-essentialist. The sorting of users is here shaped by constant feedback loops in which user data are mobilised to adjust their classifications. If parents interpellate their kids as girls or boys by gifting them pink or blue *Labubus*, algorithms gender users by means of constantly adjustable statistical distributions. ‘Gender becomes a vector, a completely digital and math-based association that defines the meaning

9 Hito Steyerl, ‘A Sea of Data: Pattern Recognition and Corporate Animism’, in *Pattern Discrimination*, Lüneburg: Meson Press, 2018, p. 1.

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid., p. 3.

12 Wendy Chun and Sarah Friedland, ‘Habits of leaking: Of sluts and network cards’, *differences* 26, no. 2 (2015): 1–28.

13 Foucault, cited in *ibid.*, p. 24–25.

of maleness, femaleness, or whatever' category is required.¹⁴ At a given moment, your digital footprint might be gendered as 31% male/69% female. Clicking on an ad for a menstrual cup or pinning a cute fit on Pinterest adapts your distribution to 30/70%. This data is then recursively fed back into the system to align the suggested content, search results and ads with a new distribution. A 'how to get over a breakup' search returns a 'Why he wasn't emotionally available, and how to attract better energy' blog-post, Google ad shows you the 'Softest hoodie for your healing era', and Spotify recommends a Taylor Swift ballad. Repeat *ad nauseum*.

This new cybernetic logic of power that emerges with the rise of networked technologies has been called one of *modulation*.¹⁵ Modulation no longer establishes a spectrum of (ab)normality or enforces a disciplinary gaze. Instead, the user is 'free' to scroll, communicate, like, upload, share, consume. The more we do so, the more data we feed into the recommendation systems and datasets for trend analysis or training AI models. As such, modulation is said to be a form of soft-power. It does not operate by directly producing docile individuals, but rather works through the management of *dividuals*, bits of recorded data that function as 'the conditions of possibilities afforded to users'.¹⁶ These conditions of possibilities concern posts, videos, songs, dating profiles, ads, search results, and AI generated content that appear on users' screens and in their feeds. Algorithms organize information so that the path of least resistance maximizes user engagement, the collection of data, and monetization.

Even though the new cybernetic identities are more 'fuzzy and amorphous'—more vibes-based—than the oppressive inflexible identities of the disciplinary regime of power, there is no need to hope, 'but only to look for new weapons'.¹⁷ As Robin James points out, the vernacular of vibes for a while felt like 'a more progressive alternative to gender [,] a more liberating option than the strict boundaries' of the traditional essentialist gender binary.¹⁸ "'are you a boy or a girl?'" i am a vibe', 'no gender, just vibe', etc.¹⁹ Vibes are here to be understood less as 'pre-existing categories and more [as] perspectives [or orientations] that emerge from the specificities of

14 John Cheney-Lippold, 'A new algorithmic identity: Soft biopolitics and the modulation of control', *Theory, culture & society*, 28, no. 6 (2011): 164-181, p. 170.

15 Deleuze, 'Postscript', p. 178.

16 Cheney-Lippold, 'Algorithmic identity', p. 174.

17 Robin James, 'Vibes, Vectors, and the Biopolitics of Algorithmic Legitimation', *It's her factory*, 8 July 2022, <https://www.its-her-factory.com/2022/07/vibes-vectors-and-the-biopolitics-of-algorithmic-legitimation/>

18 Ibid.

19 Ibid.

JERNEJ MARKELJ
& CLAUDIO CELIS
BUENO

one's situatedness'.²⁰ While it is true that, when it comes to gender, the discourse of vibes is indeed aligned with a certain non-binary queer fluidity, the bad news is that the regime of algorithmic modulation is well attuned to capturing these vibes. This regime detects user's (non)gender vibes as a vectoral orientation in algorithmic space, and reflects it back to them in the form of conditions of possibilities that organize their feeds. If break-up is the order of the day, one's vectoral direction of gender will determine if one is told to 'Buy flowers. For yourself. Obviously.' or 'Hit the gym. She's not crying at home' or that 'Queer breakups hit harder bc it's not just the person, it's the safe space you lost with them'. In short, it would seem that the vibe shift tilts in favor of platform capitalism.

There's another type of vibes discourse that we can draw on to examine the algorithmically-assisted power of platforms and dispel the autonomy of the user: the theory of networked affect.²¹ From this perspective, user agency does not reside in the unrestrained decisions and intentions of the conscious self, but is articulated by our affective interactions with the world, which either enhance or decrease the user's vital powers, their capacities to act and produce. When something is experienced as a *vibe*, a resonance, it uplifts us, moves us, spurs us into action; when something is *not a vibe*, an ick, a dissonance, we're put off and dissuaded. As vibey and icky affects accumulate and layer, these affective encounters with people, objects, and technologies direct us toward that which resonates and enhances, and away from or against that which deters and inhibits. When online, every 'little tweet or comment, every forwarded image or petition, accrues a tiny affective nugget, a little surplus enjoyment, a smidgen of attention that attaches to it, making it stand out from the larger flow before it blends back in'.²² At times the stakes are raised: a photo dump liked by the right person gives us a lasting serotonin spike, while an exceptionally disagreeable opinion triggers a push-back in the form of a hostile TL;DR comment.

Affective intensities, therefore, 'both drive online exchanges and attach people to particular platforms, threads, and groups'.²³ To channel and capture our affective inclinations, digital platforms are engineered to 'produce and circulate affect as a

20 Ibid.

21 Ken Hillis, Susanna Paasonen, and Michael Petit (eds), *Networked affect*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2015.

22 Jodi Dean, 'Affect and drive', in *Networked affect*, pp. 89-100: 90.

23 Susanna Paasonen, 'A midsummer's bonfire: Affective intensities of online debate', in *Networked affect*, pp. 27-42: 28.

binding technique'.²⁴ Indeed, as affect is what spurs platform engagement, the algorithms prioritize content that generates the most intense affective responses. 'Rather than functioning as the carrier of information or meaning', claims Caroline Busta, 'the "content" has become, instead, a conductor of energy, affect, "vibes"'.²⁵ These vibes bind us to apps, accounts, forums, and make them *sticky* 'in the sense that it encourages users to stay and revisit'.²⁶ Affective stickiness is 'an effect of the histories of contact between bodies, objects, and signs': 'the more signs circulate, the more affective they become'.²⁷ This stickiness of particular content can be more or less fleeting (as memes die, new ones emerge), but the affects that they enable, from tiny bumps of joy to more durable enchantments or perturbations, bind us to our digital devices in a more permanent way.

As Susanna Paasonen rightly points out, the force of these affective attachments becomes clear in the face of revelations such as Cambridge Analytica's data-powered psy-op designed to sway the voters. 'Despite the price of having one's data leaked and sold, and even one's opinion and affective engagements being manipulated, no massive Facebook exodus followed the controversy'.²⁸ In other words, knowing that our online environments are deeply compromised carries little affective weight compared to the affective gravity of stickiness engineered by the very same platforms. This is indeed the testament to the agential force of affect, which is, as Spinoza famously claims, the most obvious when we 'know the better, but do the worse'. Affective forces are not merely bodily passions to be tamed by the autonomous mind and its ideas, but rather intensities that precede and shape our patterns of thought and orient our actions. These affects are always already 'part of the infrastructure', in our case, embedded in and articulated by the incentive structures of data capitalism.²⁹

The question of agency is brought to the forefront also by the emergence of generative AI. With the rise of large language models, the job of a teacher is transformed into that of a Turing cop, an enforcer paranoidly trying to determine whether an

24 Jodi Dean, cited in Susana Paasonen, 'Affect, Data, Manipulation and Price in Social Media', *Distinktion: Journal of social theory*, 19, no. 2 (2018): 214-229: 217.

25 Caroline Busta, 'Hallucinating sense in the era of infinity-content', *Dokument Journal*, 29 May 2024, <https://www.documentjournal.com/2024/05/technical-images-filmor-angelicism-art-showtime-true-detective-shein/>

26 Paasonen, 'A midsummer's bonfire', p. 28.

27 Sarah Ahmed, cited in *ibid.*

28 Paasonen, 'Affect, Data, Manipulation', p. 215.

29 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983, p. 104.

JERNEJ MARKELJ
& CLAUDIO CELIS
BUENO

assignment has been authored by a human or a machine. As students begin to default to LLMs, the critics warn us about the dangers of anthropomorphizing these ‘stochastic parrots’.³⁰ Since LLMs function by probabilistically mimicking previously existing text, and are unable to grasp the meaning of language, we are told that we should avoid treating them as if there is a human mind behind them. If we keep on anthropomorphizing these language machines, Emily Bender suggests, we risk ending up dehumanizing people.³¹ A tragic consequence of more immediate dangers of such anthropomorphizing (a tendency that is often encouraged by the LLM interfaces) recently took place in the US, where a 14-year old boy died by suicide after falling in love with a chatbot. ‘What if I told you I could come home’ reads the final heartbreaking message to his AI girlfriend; ‘...please do, my sweet king’, the LLM responds.³²

While the dangers of anthropomorphizing LLMs are hard to deny, it is also true that critiques like Bender’s ultimately reinforce the boundary between humans and machines.³³ By insisting on a strict separation between human subjects as sole bearers of agency, language and intelligence, on the one hand, and mindless statistical technologies, on the other, these accounts ultimately shore up the tired anthropocentric worldview and the fiction of the autonomous subject. This takes us back to a naïve instrumentalism that frames users as sovereign agents in full control of passive, unintelligent tools. By positing humans as stable, unified and self-determined entities, what disappears from the picture is how technologies, together with the social structures in which they are embedded, shape and constitute human subjects in the first place. While this co-constitutive relation between humans and technology has been widely theorized, perhaps the most dramatic expression of this idea is provided by André Leroi-Gourhan, who sees humans as animals that invented themselves as humans by using tools.³⁴ Only once we became bipedal, he claims, and started using hands for tools, did our brains begin to develop.

30 Emily Bender, Timnit Gebru, Angelina McMillan-Major, and Shmargaret Shmitchell, ‘On the dangers of stochastic parrots: Can language models be too big’, In *Proceedings of the 2021 ACM conference on fairness, accountability, and transparency*, pp. 610–623. 2021.

31 Emily Bender, ‘Resisting Dehumanization in the Age of “AI”’, *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 33, no. 2 (2024): 114–120.

32 Blake Montgomery, ‘Mother says AI chatbot led her son to kill himself in lawsuit against its maker’, *The Guardian*, 23 October 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2024/oct/23/character-ai-chatbot-sewell-setzer-death>

33 See Claudio Celis Bueno and Jernej Markelj, ‘Towards a Posthumanist Critique of Large Language Models’, *Journal of Posthumanism* 4, no. 3 (2024): 231–245, p. 233–34.

34 André Leroi-Gourhan, *Gesture and speech*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993.

Yet, technologies shape humans for better or worse: Bernard Stiegler sees technology as a *pharmakon*, a cure and a poison at the same time.³⁵ *ChatGPT* can indeed help one write a passable essay (and cure a deadline induced panic), but its use also short-circuits (“poisons”) the development of critical thinking and writing skills. The latter is a memo that most students are yet to receive.

To avoid treating authorship, creativity, intelligence, etc. as an exclusive human capability, our concepts need to account for the continuity between human subjects and their socio-technological environments. *Posthuman*, *ecological* and *relational* approaches to thinking about agency frame it as articulated and distributed between human and nonhuman actors, from technologies and electricity to fossil fuels and fungi networks. In *The Pasteurization of France*, for instance, Bruno Latour decenters the solitary figure of a scientific genius to the *Pasteur network*, a complex and heterogeneous assemblage of *actants*.³⁶ In doing so, he suggests that Louis Pasteur’s breakthroughs weren’t isolated flashes of individual brilliance, but were enabled by a web of connections: emergence of home labs, professionalization of vets and medics, raising public hygiene movement, colonial agendas, and bacilli generation all played a role. Latour’s actor-network theory indeed manages to expose the ‘illusionary character of the [human] monopoly on agency’³⁷, and break down the anthropocentric division between culture (the domain of human activity), nature (separate, something ‘out there’ that exists independently of humans), and technology (tools through which humans modify and control nature).

Yet, by collapsing distinctions between these three domains, Latour’s relational approach paradoxically becomes aligned with the algorithmic regime of modulation and control discussed above. This ‘cybernetic’ regime constitutes a post-anthropocentric mode of governing as it is no longer focused on disciplining and interpellating human subjects, but seeks to control and regulate the relations between organisms and their environments. This complicity leads us to at least two key questions. First, how can we continue to account for issues such as power asymmetries, economic inequalities, and other forms of injustice once we have assumed a more-than-human notion of agency that bypasses the basic distinctions between nature, culture, and technics? Second, how can we break away from the humanist and anthropocentric

35 See, for instance, Bernard Stiegler, *What makes life worth living: On pharmacology*. New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, 2013.

36 Bruno Latour, *The pasteurization of France*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1993.

37 Erich Hörl, ‘Introduction to general ecology: The ecologization of thinking’, in *General Ecology*, London: Bloomsbury, 2017, pp. 1–73: 12.

JERNEJ MARKELJ

& CLAUDIO CELIS

BUENO

frameworks while still being able to scrutinize the technologies of power that shape social structures and institutions—such as prisons, factories, schools, and hospitals—that remain ‘human, all too human’ and continue to interpellate us as autonomous subjects?

This collected volume brings together authors who productively engage with these complex questions and with the broader conundrum of (non)human agency that we are facing today. The opening essay by Rob Horning examines the oddly disaffected future projected by the adverts for AI agents. By imagining a future where every meaningful activity is outsourced to software aids, these ads portray what Horning calls a *post-consumerist subjectivity*: an estranged, passive user who no longer shops—let alone thinks—for themselves. Martin Zeilinger and Deniz Jones provide a sharp critique of Refik Anadol’s AI-based art project *Echoes of the Earth*. In particular, they focus on the contradiction between Anadol’s smooth and unproblematic adoption of an energy-intensive technology and the alleged environmental and activist ethos of the piece. Rather than empowering the audience, the scale, aesthetics, and affordances of this exhibition foreclose the possibility of radical imagination and resistance. Next, Eryk Salvaggio probes the ambiguities of intelligence in what has been referred to as artificial general intelligence (AGI). Examining the ideology that surrounds it, he argues that while this intelligence is effectively based on statistics and depends on labour- and energy-intensive socio-technical networks, it is repeatedly mystified as alien and autonomous. Finally, Sara Baranzoni explores the paradoxes of current discourses on AI put forward by tech companies. On the one hand, we are told that AI is being developed for the benefit of humanity; on the other, apocalyptic narratives about the somber future of this humanity seem to contradict the humanistic and optimistic promises. But both of them seem to be ‘two sides of the same coin’. Baranzoni unpacks this contradiction by asking a series of urgent questions: who is this humanity in the name of which AI companies speak? What are the underlying assumptions and essentialisms of this alleged anthropocentrism? Which human would AI ultimately serve?

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MACHINIC
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JERNEJ MARKELJ
& CLAUDIO CELIS
BUENO

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AI Agents and Post-consumerist Subjectivity

AI AGENTS AND
POST-CONSUMERIST
SUBJECTIVITY

ROB HORNING

Earlier this year, amid the building hype for so-called AI agents — pieces of software, often represented as assistants or servants, that use computers on your behalf to presumably free you for more important tasks — the company Salesforce blanketed the airwaves with an ad for its own AI products that many found perplexing. In the ad, the actor Matthew McConaughey, playing himself, sits outside in the rain at a bistro that is strangely unwilling to seat him inside or offer him a menu. Instead he sits alone and wet, a sopping napkin in his lap, gesturing futilely at the plate of shrimp in front of him that the restaurant is apparently forcing him to eat. This is apparently because the non-Salesforce AI agents arranging his life for him were in some way miscalibrated, making the wrong calculations based on the wrong data, but in the universe of the ad, any human employees who might try to rectify the situation are either unwilling or nonexistent.

This scenario raises some questions: What kind of restaurant would treat a customer — a highly recognizable celebrity one, no less — this way? What kind of customer would just passively submit to that treatment? McConaughey seems alienated from his ability to do anything, as if agency has become an occulted mystery. But most of all, why did professional marketers conclude that this dubious display of learned helplessness was the best way to sell consumers on the desirability of AI?

In an essay for *Wired*, Kate Crawford described AI agents as ‘manipulation engines, marketed as seamless convenience’, and anticipated that they would be presented as helpful friends that will ‘support and charm us so that we fold them into every part of our lives, giving them deep access to our thoughts and actions’.³⁸ But in the Salesforce ad, we see none of this. Do marketers suspect that the convenience AI agents can currently offer is too inconsequential and anticlimactic for an ad to focus on, or that there is something fundamentally off-putting about straightforwardly representing

38 Kate Crawford, ‘AI Agents Will Be Manipulation Engines’, *Wired*, 23 December 2024, <https://www.wired.com/story/ai-agents-personal-assistants-manipulation-engines>.

an eager dependence on machines? Rather than show us consumers happily bossing around an AI agent to achieve self-evidently desirable outcomes, the ad shows us incompetent AI agents whose ineptitude can randomly strike even the most privileged people's lives with inconvenience.

Alan Kluegel, in an essay for *Defector*, concluded that the ad aimed not to raise desire but to instill dread:

This ad is not a sales pitch; it is a vision of the dystopia to come. The world depicted in this commercial is one where AI has come to dominate our lives. AI will be what intermediates you and other human beings, it will direct you where to go and what to do, it will give you what it decides to give you, its decisions are binding on you and others, its judgment is irreversible, and you will have to sit there and take it.³⁹

In other words, the Salesforce commercial presents an AI-driven control society as inevitable, imposed on us despite the many ways it will fail to serve us. Basic human decency will be automated out of existence, and our lives will be determined not by our intentions and social interactions but by a complex tangle of AI agents warring with one another for the right to distribute the diminishing spoils of a society from which nearly everyone has more or less checked out. In this future, no one would bother to try to extend consideration to others or even themselves because these avenues would be algorithmically foreclosed, either systematically anticipated or canceled.

From that point of view, the ad is an act of intimidation behind a whimsical façade. It offers an 'inscrutable solution to a nonexistent problem', as Kluegel puts it, as an alibi for what it actually threatens: a world in which compulsory booking apps and other modulating meshes of dividuation and permissioning are a fait accompli, and even the very rich and famous must default to, if not proudly flaunt, their learned helplessness. In such a world, one will have no choice but to pay protection money to the most powerful of the AI agents that determine one's access to life's basic amenities.

But that doesn't mean there isn't also a sales pitch at work; it's just one that inverts established assumptions about what consumers truly desire. The ad offers a glimpse into a world where, thanks to AI's ubiquity, consumerism as it is typically advertised — where consumers know what they want and are treated as though they

39 Alan Kluegel, 'Salesforce Is Using A Hallucination To Sell AI', *Defector*, 7 February 2025, <https://defector.com/salesforce-is-using-a-hallucination-to-sell-ai>.

are always right — appears to be suddenly inoperative, and instead the more powerful you are, the less you will want to be involved with the details of your own existence. The Salesforce ad assumes a broad-based fatigue with individual agency, with the vagaries of being recognized as a subject, and the requirement of having to fashion a consumer self, and gestures toward a post-consumerist world that AI will usher in, one in which we aren't expected to shop our way toward having a recognizable personality, signified through our choices and displays. Instead, identity is expressed by what the automated decision-making systems show you and what they allow you to do. The promise isn't that something you want to do will be more convenient but that you will conveniently be relieved of wanting to do anything.

Other recent AI ads have taken a similar tack, and they have seemed as baffling as the Salesforce ad, presenting scenarios that appear at first glance not merely dystopic but morally repugnant. A recent run of commercials for 'Apple Intelligence' promise that your phone can help you fake your way through life by reading and communicating on your behalf. In a July piece for the *New Yorker*, Vinson Cunningham assesses one in which an executive lies about having done the expected reading for a meeting and is rescued by an instantaneous AI-generated summary.⁴⁰ As jokey and self-deprecating as these ads sometimes seem, he suggests, still "the point is to sell us something, less a consumer item or a user interface than a life style unmarred by pesky intellectual tasks." As a 'preferred state', he argues, such ads evoke 'a zoned-out semi-presence, the worker accounted for in body but absent in spirit'. They promise that even if the world is closed feedback loop, a system where everything is already anticipated and addressed and our movements are controlled, we can still, with the right tools, withdraw from it internally.

In other ads, the 'zoned-out' state of grace extends beyond the workplace to familial relations. A different Apple ad depicts a father on a sofa on his birthday receiving gifts from his kids while his wife, alone in the distance, listens in. Visibly annoyed that her daughters made and wrapped presents while she accepted at face value her husband's demurrals that 'we said no gifts' — that is, the promise that they could all be comfortable doing nothing for each other — the wife then brings her phone into action to salvage the situation, getting it to make a video of the father teaching the kids and presenting this as something she made for him. Her

40 Vinson Cunningham, "What Do Commercials About A.I. Really Promise?", *The New Yorker*, 12 July 2023, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/critics-notebook/what-do-commercials-about-ai-really-promise>.

ROB HORNING

family is immediately absorbed by the screen, proving that a video documenting an activity is more significant than performing the activity itself. But we are not expected to identify with them or their joy, which is made to seem somewhat shallow — more a cloying claim on other people's time. Instead, in a brazenly cynical turn, we are brought to focus on the wife, who half-heartedly smiles at her family and then turns to gloat for the camera, as if to say, See how stupid people are? Don't let them make you feel guilty. Just use technology to fool them into thinking you care while you saunter off to do something for yourself — or whatever some other set of algorithms recommends you do.

Rather than the old consumerist alibi 'it's the thought that counts' — code for 'a purchase can stand in for your care' — the tagline for AI could be 'the thought doesn't count either'. AI 'thinks' so you can be thoughtless, in every sense of the word. The normalization of AI depends on widespread acceptance that what makes a thought count is not who it comes from but what it contains: that the subjective component of thought is unimportant, if not illusory. No one really knows what goes on in someone else's mind anyway, so why even bother believing in it? Other people's intelligence is what's 'artificial' when you really think about it, right? Who's to say they are not all bots, on whom true consideration would be wasted?

Not to be sentimental about mainstream depictions of conventional domesticity, but it's somewhat startling that Apple expect viewers to readily side with the inconsiderate, isolated individual rather than the compassionate and mutually attentive family unit. What the wife escapes from in the ad is not some tedious form of busywork but what's usually portrayed as a quintessential moment of togetherness, a key justification for the whole project of the nuclear family. It's as if the very idea of reciprocity, even among parents and children, is being dismissed, mocked as an obstacle we have all been hoping that technology would at last eliminate. Like McConaughy in the Salesforce ad, Apple's lazy executive and supercilious wife are presented ambivalently, as though we were supposed to both sympathize with their predicament and feel superior to them, despite their putatively relatable lapses. It's never entirely clear whether we are supposed to envy or despise them.

Perhaps this frisson is the point. A recent article by Ismail Muhammad in the *New York Times Magazine* wondered 'Why Does Every Commercial for AI Think You're a Moron?' and pointed to the same sorts of seemingly false notes in Meta's AI commercials, where the protagonists appear incapable of acting like 'normal' people, 'with a capacity for being curious about someone else's

life’ and instead seek devices that spare them ‘any feelings that might lend meaning to their lives’.⁴¹ They ‘are motivated by laziness and incuriosity’, Muhammad points out, ‘even when it comes to the most intimate of concerns’. Muhammad suggests that the ads invite us to laugh at these figures, and by extension at AI, to try and distract us from what the material consequences of AI’s takeover of the economy would actually entail — lost jobs, violated privacy, deeper isolation — but the bleakness of that future emerges nonetheless. Similarly, Kluegel reads the Salesforce ad, which ends with McConaughey being rescued from the AI world by Woody Harrelson, as incoherently nullifying its own case.

But rather than treat these ads as failing to convey a coherent pitch, it may be better to assume a different strategy is at work. These ads undoubtedly offer up efficiently drawn portraits of weak, incurious, and downright silly people eagerly using technology to renege on their basic duties as human beings — they have ‘offloaded their capacities for thinking and social interaction’, as Muhammad writes. It’s all too easy to distance oneself from them, to think to oneself, I could never be that person. This helps establish AI as a kind of forbidden pleasure for viewers who might not want to admit to themselves how attractive it might be to offload their capacity for thinking and communicating as these characters do.

It may be that we don’t need a hard sell on the idea of not having a self — at least on the terms that it is currently offered under current socioeconomic conditions. In the face of the constant pressure to speak, to participate, to contribute, to make connections, to monetize our personalities, to produce more and more content, and to want more and more things, it can come across as a relief to be offered a means of having the burden of subjecthood eradicated, even if we must also disavow it to let it comfort us.

Consumerism is premised on the idea that nothing is more gratifying than exercising choice in a robust marketplace of options, and then having the opportunity to display those choices and what they signify about you. But ads for technology now offer a transition away from conspicuous consumption toward conspicuous compliance under the guise of greater convenience. Just make one final choice and be free of the burden of making choice after choice forever. The idea of an ultra-competent AI agent appeals to the basically masochistic fantasy that surrendering

41 Ismail Muhammad, ‘Why Does Every Commercial for A.I. Think You’re a Moron?’, *The New York Times Magazine*, 25 June 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/06/25/magazine/ai-commercials-ads-loneliness.html>.

control is the crux of pleasure, that the secret apex of agency is choosing to give it all away to something that is commanded to command you, that to become a tech-directed object is somehow to become a pure subject. In AI ads, it's as though we are presumed to be jealous of our devices: We don't want to use the phone; we want to be the phone. After all, it always seems to have everyone else's attention.

'Convenience is the site of our deepest alienation', Crawford writes, and this alienation appears as a diminished capacity to will anything. Convenience is another name for lost resolve; it's an aversion to agency that frames surrender as satisfaction. The more one cedes the capability to want things, to choose things, to evaluate things to forms of automation, the more one will become incapable of taking any sort of agency. But this doesn't mean it can't be framed as liberation from the burden of having to have personal desires: Better to let a machine choose goals for you that it can also meet for you than to risk even a single moment of disappointment or nonfulfillment.

In a 1985 essay, Jean Baudrillard described this compliant passivity as a resistance strategy, 'the silence of the masses': 'The deepest desire', he claimed, 'is perhaps to give the responsibility for one's desire to someone else'.⁴² Baudrillard suggests that by delegating the terms of our participation to the system that is already trying to predict and pre-empt us, we can absent ourselves from its totalizing, carving out a place where a self might be free and untouched, even if this self can't be realized in any way. A decade later, in 'The Virtual Illusion: or the Automatic Writing of the World', he anticipates how something like generative models could help realize this kind of escape:

We always feel a little responsible for films we haven't seen, for desires we haven't realized, for people we haven't answered, for crimes we haven't committed, for money we haven't spent. All this generates a mass of removed possibilities, and the idea that a machine is there that can deal with these possibilities, can stock them, filter them (an answer machine, a memory bank), and progressively absorb and reabsorb them, is a very comforting idea... All these machines are wonderful. They give us a sort of freedom. They help us to get free from the machine itself, since they interconnect one with another and function

42 Jean Baudrillard, 'The Masses: The Implosion of the Social in the Media', *New Literary History* 16, no. 3 (1985): 577-89.

in a loop. They help us to get free from our own will and from our own production.⁴³

Robert Pfaller describes this kind of ruse as ‘interpassivity’ (as opposed to interactivity), ‘a strategy of escaping identification and consequently subjectivization’ and all the burdens that come from it.⁴⁴ In Pfaller’s account, interpassivity describes a ‘double delegation’: first one transfers enjoyment to a machine or a piece of media — the video recorder that watches for us, the voicemail that listens, or now the AI agents that purportedly can do anything — and then one transfers ‘the belief in the illusion they have staged to an undefined, naive other’ who recognizes these devices as human-like agents. The rubes who currently populate AI ads fit this role perfectly. In enjoying our inner distance from these characters, we permit ourselves to ultimately behave outwardly as they do.

Through layers of irresolvable irony, Baudrillard, prophesizes the ‘transformation of all our acts, of all historical events, of all material substance and energy into pure information’, interpreting this as a desire for ‘an automatic world from which we can retire and remove definitively’. He suggests that ‘we all dream of perfect autonomous beings who, far from acting against our will ... would meet our desire to escape our own will, and realize the world as a self-fulfilling prophecy’. He may have thought this subversive position revealed something that was masked in most interpretations of technology, rejected as too pessimistic, too uncongenial to the official ideologies of humanism and aspirational individualism. But with the advent of AI agents, tech companies are happy to build marketing campaigns on it. ‘The highest definition of the information corresponds to the lowest definition of the event’, Baudrillard asserts. Or, to put that in a promotional slogan that tech companies might find more useful, ‘heaven is a place where nothing ever happens’.

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AI Art and the Foreclosure of Ecological Agency: a Critique of Refik Anadol's *Echoes of the Earth*

AI ART AND THE
FORECLOSURE
OF ECOLOGICAL
AGENCY

MARTIN ZEILINGER AND DENIZ JOHNS

In early 2024, Serpentine Galleries presented *Echoes of the Earth: Living Archive*, the first large UK solo exhibition by the Turkish-American artist Refik Anadol, who is best known for large-scale, immersive AI-generated installations. The exhibition featured two recent artworks as well as data visualizations introducing the *Large Nature Model* (LNM), a bespoke AI model developed by Refik Anadol Studios (RAS) and used to create the installations. Anadol describes the LNM as ‘a scientific, educational, and art tool’ for environmental activism. Acting as ‘the voice of nature’,⁴⁵ the LNM’s purpose is to make ‘the abstract concept of environmental conservation tangible, encouraging a collective responsibility to act’.⁴⁶ In support of this ambition, the exhibition adopted what has been described as a ‘radical clarity’ about data collection and technical processes, in order to ‘demystify’ AI,⁴⁷ make it more relatable and usable, and to mobilize art as ‘the most powerful way of achieving great things for humanity’.⁴⁸

Our discussion challenges this narrative. *Echoes of the Earth* is presented as part of an ongoing effort to produce generative AI art that can empower audiences for ecological thought and action. In our view, with regard both to the experiential affordances of *Echoes of the Earth* and to the affordances of the underlying technologies, this is not achieved. We are living in a time of runaway corporate AI development, accelerating climate

45 Ravail Khan, “‘this AI model will be the voice of nature’: Refik Anadol on his exhibition at Serpentine Galleries”, *Designboom*, 16 Feb 2024, <https://www.designboom.com/art/ai-model-nature-refik-anadol-exhibition-serpentine-galleries-echoes-of-the-earth-living-archives-02-16-2024/>.

46 Dataland, ‘Large Nature Model (LNM)’, n.d., <https://www.dataland.art/about/large-nature-model>.

47 Louis Jebb, ‘On process: Refik Anadol seeks to demystify AI art by showing how it is put together’, *The Art Newspaper*, 5 April 2024, <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2024/04/05/on-process-refik-anadol-seeks-to-demystify-ai-art-by-showing-how-it-is-put-together>.

48 Khan, *ibid*.

MARTIN
ZEILINGER &
DENIZ JOHNS

emergency, and global resurgence of neo-fascist tendencies. If AI art is to contribute meaningfully, it must make computational tools open and inclusive, activate a collective radical imagination to help us prefigure alternative futures, and create opportunities for socio-political and ecological interventions. The ‘Large Nature Model’ and Anadol’s nature-themed AI art foreclose the possibility for any such agency to emerge.

A REQUIEM FOR A DYING PLANET?

Echoes of the Earth: Living Archive transformed Serpentine’s North Gallery into a ‘psychedelic, multisensory canvas’⁴⁹ framing an immersive experience of AI-generated video and sound. Of the two large-scale installations on display, the first, *Artificial Realities: Rainforest* (2024), envelopes viewers in an ever-changing and seemingly never-ending polychromatic moving image nature-scape of hypnotic intensity, which covers several walls and ceiling segments. The second, *Artificial Realities: Coral* (2023), focuses on underwater ecologies. Reminiscent of Anadol’s MOMA exhibition ‘Unsupervised’ from the previous year, this work consists of vibrant shapes undulating at the visual boundaries between billowing waveforms and morphing coral structures. Both artworks rely heavily on the *Large Nature Model* (LNM) developed by Anadol’s studio, which was arguably the centerpiece of the exhibition. The rainforest-themed work is reported to have been generated using hundreds of millions of real-world data points of rainforest flora, fauna, and fungi contained in the LNM dataset, while the coral-focused piece draws on 135 million images of real-world coral formations.⁵⁰ At the gallery entrance, a massive ‘data wall’ presented image-based and textual information about how the data for the model was collected, compiled, and used for generative purposes.

Throughout the exhibition, the color explosions and sonic onslaught of Anadol’s environmental simulation struck us as overwhelming yet barren. The windowless space and the screen-focused exhibition design conveyed an industrial flair that did not invoke a feeling of immersion in nature, but rather a foreboding sense of orbiting around a dying planet. According to Anadol, these artworks are intended to stimulate the audiences’ imagination regarding alternative futures of thriving natural environments,

49 Khan, *ibid.*

50 Both installations were also meant to be accompanied by AI-generated scents, a feature that neither of us noticed on our visits.

but they had the opposite effect: instead of being emboldened with ecological agency, *Echoes of the Earth* gave us the sense of witnessing a post-apocalyptic requiem memorializing bygone natural environments through machinic misrememberings and hallucinations.

The exhibition's deluge of generative nature simulacra, combined with the comfort of cozy bean bags were inconspicuously incapacitating the viewer, reducing them to docile onlookers. It partially echoed Tom Gunning's concept of the 'cinema of attractions' (circa 1895 to 1907) – an early cinematic mode that foregrounded spectacle and the novelty of the medium over narrative, as seen in the films of Georges Méliès.⁵¹ Crucially, however, those early films were not immersive; they did not conceal their constructedness and often addressed the audience directly. If anything, they inspired and paved the way for avant-garde cinema, which continued to draw attention to the act of watching, the apparatus, and the constructed nature of cinema itself. *Echoes of the Earth*, by contrast, lacks this reflexivity. It envelops the viewer in a sensory spectacle that pacifies rather than activates, offering immersion without critical engagement with environmental issues. And yet, according to all promotional materials and artist interviews we have seen, the artworks in the exhibition were meant to do precisely that – to inform audiences, to position AI as an accessible technology for a collective fight against climate change, and to give everyone the tools they need to take action.

AI ART, AGENCY AND THE RADICAL IMAGINATION

We left the exhibition with many renewed questions regarding the distribution of agency between artist, artwork, audience, and the tools of art-making. If an artwork is meant to confer on its audiences the agency for ecological thought and action, then what aesthetic and critical tactics allow artists to create conditions in which such ambitions of empowerment can be achieved? What attitudes or qualities are manifest in Anadol's work in this regard? More generally speaking, how can AI-augmented art that emphasizes spectacular, immersive experiences account for the loss of agency that is so frequently associated with generative AI art?

⁵¹ Tom Gunning, 'The Cinema of Attractions: Early Film, Its Spectator and the Avant-Garde', in *Early Cinema: Space, Frame, Narrative*, London: BFI Publishing, 1990, p. 57.

MARTIN
ZEILINGER &
DENIZ JOHNS

Crucially, when we experience an artwork, our sense of agency is shaped by how the work addresses us. Anthropological theories of art assume that because artworks can influence our thoughts and feelings, and presumably also our actions, we tend to perceive them ‘as if’ they themselves possess some degree of agency.⁵² An artwork, in this view, constitutes an agent that ‘causes events to happen in [its] vicinity’,⁵³ and which may confer a similar sense of agency on us. But ‘as if’ can also give way to assertions of much more tangible capacities. As Inte Gloerich, referencing the work of Cornelius Castoriadis, has noted, the very act of imagining something can carry the radical potential of making change possible.⁵⁴ Here, imagination emerges as ‘a social phenomenon that is consequential and powerful, rather than passive or reflexive,’ and which ‘opens up the possibility to create different futures from the status quo’.⁵⁵

The radical potential of the individual or collective imagination can only be realized, however, if artworks create the right conditions for critical engagement. When artists adopt emerging technologies, this process is typically accompanied by waves of new critical practices. From the 1960s onwards, for instance, experimental filmmakers demystified cinema through radical interrogations of the medium, challenging the mainstream studio system and the ideologies it perpetuated through its narrative conventions. Similarly, early video artists including Nam June Paik, Dara Birnbaum, David Hall and Tamara Krikorian appropriated the medium of television by hacking and repurposing its components. Works such as Krikorian’s *Disintegrating Forms* (1976) encouraged viewers to critically engage not only with the image content produced on television screens but also with the *modus operandi* and ideological underpinnings of the medium itself.⁵⁶ More than half a century after the emergence of these remarkable experimental practices in electronic imaging, it feels ironic that the spectacle of AI art once more positions its audiences in ways reminiscent of the late 19th century’s ‘cinema of attractions’.

52 E.g., Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998.

53 Ibid., p. 16.

54 Inte Gloerich, *Reimagining the Truth Machine: Blockchain Imaginaries between the Rational and the More-than-Rational*. Doctoral Thesis, Utrecht University, 2025. <https://doi.org/10.33540/2726>.

55 Gloerich, 179–180.

56 See also, for example, Birnbaum’s *Technology/Transformation: Wonder Woman* (1978–79), Nam June Paik’s *Magnet TV* (1965) and Hall’s *This is a Television Receiver* (1976).

Work like that of Anadol, despite the framing narratives of audience empowerment, fails to provoke the radical imagination of its viewers because it reinforces the mystery of the computational tools it utilizes. Rather than offering radical medium-specific interventions that break open the blackboxes of AI, this work fetishizes the polished surfaces of the technology. In *Echoes of the Earth*, Anadol presents the abilities of AI as supernatural, and deemphasizes its reality as a constructed system shaped by human biases, corporate interests, and ideological frameworks. Here, aspects of human industry that share in the destruction of natural environments are presented as if they were part of a utopian solution to climate change. Art-making has become complicit in the very systems and ideologies it claims to challenge.

OPEN-SOURCE RHETORIC AND PROPRIETARY PRACTICE

Our critique of *Echoes of the Earth* comes into yet clearer focus when we consider the *Large Nature Model* (LNM) in more detail. Anadol describes the LNM with the usual maximalist superlatives familiar from ‘big AI’ contexts, portraying it as a groundbreaking technological achievement capable of handling unprecedented volumes of data to generate never-before-seen outputs. It is indeed a very significant achievement for a non-corporate entity to train an AI model at this scale: the system relies on a multimodal collection of over half a billion nature-related data points (including images, ambisonic audio recordings, statistical climate data, archival documents, and textual descriptions), and can generate extremely high-resolution outputs (over 50 million pixels, in the case of a performance at the Las Vegas Sphere). However, given that the LNM uses neural networks adapted from Meta AI’s Llama family, high end GPU hardware provided by NVIDIA, and scalable computing power hosted by Google Cloud,⁵⁷ Anadol’s LNM is hardly an independent endeavor, nor one that can be easily reproduced by other art initiatives. The project exemplifies, rather,

57 See ‘Media artist Refik Anadol fine-tunes Llama for “Large Nature Model”’, Meta AI Blog, 13 September 2024, <https://ai.meta.com/blog/refik-anadol-llama/>; ‘Large Nature Model — Living Art’, n.d., <https://refikanadol.com/works/large-nature-model-living-art/>; ‘Collection of Works by Refik Anadol’, n.d., <https://refikanadol.com/iconiq/>.

MARTIN
ZEILINGER &
DENIZ JOHNS

what Hito Steyerl has described as the ‘onboarding’ of artists and arts communities into new proprietary tech paradigms.⁵⁸

It is perhaps for this reason that Anadol’s studio likes to put a strong emphasis on what, supposedly, distinguishes the LNM from other current-generation Large Language Models (LLMs): the LNM, according to Anadol, is ‘open source’, uses only data that is ‘ethically collected,’ and does not ‘rely on human intellect’ because it is based ‘solely on nature data’.⁵⁹ On this basis, Anadol characterizes the LNM as a ‘tool for insight, education, and advocacy’.⁶⁰ This is a compelling narrative. It implies that the LNM strives to put environmental data and pioneering AI technology into the hands of all users, in order to make them potential agents of change in a collective struggle against climate change. A closer look reveals, however, that this characterization is misleading and factually incorrect.

To begin with, by claiming that the LNM somehow bypasses human intellect, Anadol implies that whereas conventional LLMs can ever only mimic human knowledge, the LNM enables nature itself to manifest as a more-than-human agent. Yet even though Anadol tells us that Amazonian indigenous elders have taught him how to let nature speak for itself through AI,⁶¹ the LNM is very far removed from anything like Jane Bennet’s ‘vibrant matter’⁶² or other eco-phenomenological perspectives that seriously explore the critical agency of nature. The LNM’s outputs are, plainly, human-curated (and corporate-sponsored) renderings based on the human-controlled execution of human-written algorithms that manipulate a human-compiled dataset of human-captured information. As far as we could see, everything in *Echoes of the Earth* amplified, rather than transcended, the anthropocentric epistemologies of knowledge extraction, interpretation, and organization that characterize AI as we know it today.

Still more problematic is Anadol’s misrepresentation of the LNM as open-source technology. This characterization fits nicely with the idea that the artist’s work is dedicated to knowledge sharing, demystifying AI, and empowering everyday audiences.

58 Kate Brown, ‘Hito Steyerl on Why NFTs and A.I. Image Generators Are Really Just ‘Onboarding Tools’ for Tech Conglomerates’, *Artnet*, 10 March, 2023, <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/these-renderings-do-not-relate-to-reality-hito-steyerl-on-the-ideologies-embedded-in-a-i-image-generators-2264692>.

59 Jebb, *ibid.*

60 Refik Anadol Studios, ‘What Can Artificial Intelligence Learn from Nature?’, *Issues in Science & Technology* 40(4), 2024. <https://issues.org/artificial-intelligence-nature-refik-anadol/>.

61 Khan, *ibid.*

62 Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2009.

Yet it appears to be untrue. While Refik Anadol Studios openly acknowledges that the LNM could not have been realized without access to publicly available research data,⁶³ information seems to have flown only in one direction, not unlike the scraping of Internet data into the blackboxes of corporate LLMs. Anadol's studio does maintain a presence on GitHub (one of the main web platforms for sharing open-source materials), but, at the time of writing, there is no evidence that any of the LNM's source code or model weights have been made available to the public.

In fact, the opposite is the case: in early 2023, the studio released *Living Encyclopedia*, a web-based generative tool aimed at 'reimagining the traditional concept of an encyclopedia by transforming static knowledge into an evolving, multi-sensory experience powered by AI.'⁶⁴ Using this tool, users can immerse themselves in generative nature hallucinations similar to those exhibited at Serpentine Galleries. But *Living Encyclopedia* promotes open knowledge sharing only in its name. In fact, the web application is subscription-based (payable in USD or cryptocurrency) – a for-profit wrapper for a computational tool that was built at least in part using open access data that stipulates non-commercial use.⁶⁵ As it is, the public does not have access to the LNM for independent use and further development. This clearly contradicts open-source ethics and the promotional narrative maintained by Anadol and his studio, according to which open and inclusive audience engagement with the LNM would amplify our individual and collective agency for using AI to counter climate change.

The utopian vision at the heart of Anadol's project – that of an open-source "large nature model" – is truly powerful and radical. The problem is that the closed-source instantiations of the LNM make it impossible for this vision's potential to become realized. The questions raised by Anadol are valid and important: what critical dimensions would be added to AI-augmented artworks if the data and technology on which they rely would be open source?

63 Among the data sources for the LNM, Anadol's studio acknowledges, among others, public archives and open access repositories that are in the stewardship of The Smithsonian Institution, The National Geographic Society, London's Natural History Museum, and the Cornell Lab of Ornithology.

64 'Living Encyclopedia', *Dataland*, n.d., <https://dataland.art/about/living-encyclopedia>.

65 The National Geographic Society, for example, prohibits commercial uses for most of its open access data. This also applies to most open access data provided by the Cornell Lab of Ornithology. Given the limited information available, it is impossible to know what agreements Anadol has with these organizations. However, it is notable that on Dataland, Anadol's commercial website that hosts the *Living Encyclopedia*, the LNM is *not* described as open-source technology.

MARTIN
ZEILINGER &
DENIZ JOHNS

How would this change audiences' engagement with such work, and what agency would this give audiences to rethink the relation of AI to nature? Unfortunately, *Echoes of the Earth* does not allow for answers to any of these questions to emerge.

CODA: BEYOND SPECTACLE, TOWARDS ECOLOGICAL PRACTICES OF AI

Might it be said that Anadol's approach provides a gateway for affective engagement with climate change, in order to shift popular imaginaries and prompt action? We don't think so. Spectacle, no matter how luminous, cannot be a substitute for critical reflection and radical imagination. In the windowless chambers of *Echoes of the Earth*, we were prompted to recline and surrender to overwhelming generative panoramas that left no discursive space for situating ourselves within a planetary ecological crisis. The result was not empowerment, but a sense of having experienced a memorial for lost ecological systems. The technological imaginary undergirding Anadol's work amplifies this foreclosure of agency. The project's 'open-source' and 'more-than-human' branding gestures towards inclusivity and the formulation of a public pedagogy of AI, but ultimately it masks the realities of a proprietary pipeline that perpetuates the same kind of extractive asymmetry which fuels both commercial AI development and environmental degradation. Overall, the LNM instrumentalizes natural archives without granting publics the reciprocal capacity to query, reroute, or reshape the system.

If AI art is to move beyond memorializing, mystification, and rootless hallucination, artists must reorient their practices from mere immersion to full-on intervention. Some emerging arts initiatives already demonstrate what this might look like. As we finished writing our first chapter draft, the AIxDESIGN Festival was about to take place in Amsterdam. With the theme 'On Slow AI', the festival was dedicated to using AI at a meaningful scale so as to engage it critically in new community-driven collectives of action, with the goal to 'deconstruct mainstream AI stories, dream up new ones, and figure out how to make them real'.⁶⁶ A few weeks later, also in Amsterdam, a symposium with a similar theme – "Slow AI: Practices of Thinking, Sensing, and Refusing" – promised

to extend these explorations.⁶⁷ Elsewhere, the Manchester-based FutureEverything Festival has recently announced the inclusion of Nature as a full member of the board that steers the organization's activities, and has commissioned the development of a 'Compost Computer' to contribute to powering its digital presence.⁶⁸ As these examples suggest, the most transformative critical interventions in AI technology may not hinge on the large-scale adoption of corporate expertise and resources, but, above all else, on work that activates the radical imagination at a relatable scale.

For artists and organizations alike, the charge is twofold. First, demystify the 'stack' that constitutes contemporary AI: expose hardware footprints, reveal problematic dataset lineages, and lower accessibility thresholds so that audiences can join in hacking and contesting the workings of AI rather than merely consume it. And second, design encounters that recalibrate distributions of agency in open, non-hierarchical ways, so that shared tactics can emerge, in neighborhood workshops, citizen-science networks, and interspecies councils.

Stepping back into Kensington Gardens after the show, our sense of agency and possible futures was rekindled by a myriad of chaotic details... a pile of rotting leaves, the fractal remains of last summer's thistles, faint traces of the 'desire paths' created by disobedient park visitors, all of it inviting us to engage and explore. It is empowering to be present in this way, in the here and now, because that is exactly when and where the prefigurative power of imagination can begin to shift into action. Let the small jolts of wonder we experience when we wander into an early-spring park be instructive: the most urgent task for AI-augmented art is not to simulate hallucinatory ecosystems, but to scaffold the collective, hands-on labor that is required to sustain existing ones. To transform AI from a sad echo of earth into a field of new experimental practices and cultural pathways for its repair, spectacle must be relinquished for open, situated, and more-than-human collaboration.

67 'Symposium: Slow AI – Practices of Thinking, Sensing, and Refusing' <https://framerframed.nl/en/projecten/symposium-slow-ai-practices-of-thinking-sensing-and-refusing/>

68 See 'Nature to join FutureEverything', n.d., <https://futureeverything.org/news/nature-to-join-futureeverything/> and 'Compost Computer', n.d., <https://futureeverything.org/portfolio/entry/compost-computer/>.

MARTIN
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AI ART AND THE
FORECLOSURE
OF ECOLOGICAL
AGENCY

The Domesday Generation

ERYK SALVAGGIO

ERYK SALVAGGIO

The Domesday Book—or, in modern parlance, the *Doomsday Book*—might have been the 10th Century's idea of AI. William the Conqueror, wanting an index of all his holdings in the Kingdom of England, gathered data on the 13,418 parcels of land under his new reign. Everything taxable was counted, from free and enslaved laborers to sheep, woodlands, fisheries, and buildings. Domesday started with a data-gathering effort, tallied by royal investigators and recorded in the dataset of a bound volume. This book took its name from Judgment Day. Richard FitzNeal, King Henry II's treasurer, explained it this way:

This is a metaphor: for just as no judgment of that final severe and terrible trial can be evaded by any subterfuge, so when any controversy arises in the kingdom concerning the matters contained in the book, and recourse is made to the book, its word cannot be denied or set aside without penalty. ... For this reason we call this book the "book of judgments" not because it contains decisions made in controversial cases, but because from it, as from the Last Judgement, there is no further appeal.⁶⁹

The Domesday book is a useful reference to understand 'Artificial General Intelligence', or AGI. Loosely defined (as it must be), AGI is a form of faith in the eventual automation of human decision-making at levels rivaling or surpassing a human mind. This should lead us to a number of questions, such as: who are the human beings being surpassed? What purpose does automating decisions serve? When many decisions are to be made, which decision will the machine choose? Many scholars of AI suggest that these questions are irrelevant, owing to the emergence of AI or AGI as a form of *other* intelligence. Why focus on the machine's comparison or contrast to human thought, when many varieties of thought exist? I agree it is necessary to de-center the human metaphor from AI. Denying this metaphor helps to eviscerate market hype. It also helps to place the human mind

69 Richard FitzNeal, in Emilie Amt and S. D. Church (eds) *Dialogus de Scaccario: the Dialogue of the Exchequer; Constitutio Domus Regie: Disposition of the King's Household*. Oxford: Clarendon Press. pp. 96–99.

in a constellation of thoughts produced through interactions between nodes and systems. We exist among mycelial networks, social networks, bird migrations and 5G towers.

We also shape and are shaped by political systems. Through all of this, a form of cooperative intelligence emerges, and the overemphasis on the human mind erases much of its consequences from our cognition but also, often, in literal extinctions and habitat destruction. Because this illusion of cooperative intelligence can lead us to misunderstand the effect of technological, political and media flows on our own lives, it is important to be agile in the adjustment of our frames. At which level is which analysis appropriate? Acknowledging AGI as an ‘other’ intelligence is half true, but so too would the Doomsday Book serve as an ‘other’ intelligence. Both are also modeled after a narrow slice of *human* thought: logic, rationality, and the supremacy of the count.

The Domesday rationale persists in some corners around so-called ‘alignment’ of AI systems. Defining the ‘intelligence’ of AI or AGI, Russel, Dewey and Tegmark suggest that ‘[t]he criterion for intelligence is related to statistical and economic notions of rationality — colloquially, the ability to make good decisions, plans, or inferences. The adoption of probabilistic representations and statistical learning methods has led to a large degree of integration and cross-fertilization between AI, machine learning, statistics, control theory, neuroscience, and other fields’.⁷⁰ In essence, these scholars define intelligence as rationality, derived from statistics. In other cases, AGI is defined by the fantasy of its uses. Mustafa Suleyman defines AGI as an ability to generate \$1 million from a \$100,000 seed fund: a fantasy of AGI as an engine for venture capitalists. For those who see AGI as a machine that replaces labor, we find a tautology: we will know it is possible when we have a machine that can replace labor.

The difference between a machine that is *useful* for a task and one that is merely *capable* is vast. Humans decide the thresholds of capability. We know from Langdon Winner about a machine that could pick tomatoes but could not discern which tomatoes were ripe.⁷¹ The union workers were replaced anyway. AGI will never be useful for replacing politics, but whether it is capable is just a matter of someone deciding to use it that way. So it makes sense

70 Stuart Russell, Daniel Dewey, and Max Tegmark. ‘Research priorities for robust and beneficial artificial intelligence’, *AI magazine* 36, no. 4 (2015): 105-114.

71 Langdon Winner. ‘Do Artifacts Have Politics?’, *Daedalus*, vol. 109, no. 1, 1980, pp. 121-36.

that AGI has no clear definition or benchmarks,⁷² because AGI has nothing to do with technology. AGI is better understood as a relationship to technology: it is an orienting goal through which we imagine what to build, and what political arrangements we hope to manifest.

MEET THE HUMAN

The Domesday Book served as an intelligent system because it was at the center of a political arrangement. The book was an idle object, considered the final authority in matters of justice because humans granted it that power. Today, the infrastructure of computation is not only data and we do not operate under any fixed authority. We are immersed in a multidimensional construct that determines how power circulates.

What we call AGI would likewise emerge or take shape through a global network of protocols, data flows, and infrastructural layers that reshape territorial and political relations and are formed by fusions of politics, environments, and capital. AGI is a fantasy intended to steer the coordination of these complex infrastructures through the elision of politics. Consider, for instance, not only the hurdles of developing and assessing an AGI system but also the political will required to install it. In 2025, Elon Musk is relying on the circumvention of politics to create a government managed by large language models. Despite the fashionable positioning of AI as an "other" intelligence that demands respect equal to that of ecological systems or even a dog, it is only as intelligent as the bureaucratic organ whose blood (data) it drains.

AGI will be steered by rooms full of engineers, not philosophers; philosophers are not really any better but flatter themselves. Maybe a philosopher or two gets paid by a tech billionaire to pretend systems exist without capital, and to make Silicon Valley nonsense sound like philosophy. All of it serves the mission of abstracting concrete computational logic into something mysterious and 'other', a kind of political correctness for respecting Microsoft products. To decenter the human makes sense at a certain scale, but the annihilation of human interest is pure technocapitalism. To that end, 'the human' collapses broad numbers of people into a single, badly compressed datapoint.

72 Meredith Ringel Morris, Jascha Sohl-Dickstein, Noah Fiedel, Tris Warkentin, Allan Dafoe, Aleksandra Faust, Clement Farabet, and Shane Legg. 'Levels of AGI for Operationalizing Progress on the Path to AGI', *arXiv preprint arXiv:2311.02462* (2023).

Artificial Intelligence is not so cleanly ‘other’. In many ways, it is a distinctly human extension of one frame of human thought, and serves to even further distance us from non-human intelligence by accelerating our environmental devastation of the Earth. Here, I agree with Birhane, Van Dijk & Pasquale who also provide useful definitions: ‘We designate posthumanism, without a hyphen, as a philosophical position that draws on thinkers like Bruno Latour to enrich understanding of the ontological status of humans and non-humans. Post-humanism or transhumanism, on the other hand, argues that [a] biological human being is insufficient to solve the problems in the world. Therefore, “we” should (or inevitably will be) be transcended by our own intelligent technologies, for example, robots that outsmart us and outperform us. This accelerationist, transhumanist, or anti-humanist visions see human beings as irrelevant or archaic (Bostrom, 2008; Torres, 2021)’.⁷³

AGI, as an extension of the current AI trajectory, is not even a technology at all. It is a political system. It is a fiction designed to obtain and restructure political power. This story changes so often that there is no shared definition, despite the orientation of significant resources in AI research toward AGI as a goal. As Blili-Hamelin *et al.* put it, ‘What forms of intelligence and technology are worth imagining are political and social questions. However, current approaches to AGI risk mistaking these questions for technical questions’.⁷⁴

It is critical to recognize that the political character of AGI emerges from its promised realization, and that this promise is its dominion, through infrastructural embedding, into global networks. Rather than being a standalone artifact engineered to govern through democratic consensus building, AGI reflects an obscure, distributed assemblage of technologies that span physical hardware, software protocols, and institutional frameworks under a unified point of control. This then becomes a mechanism for governance via feedback, operating within the constraints of the system as determined by either the designers or the AGI. In either case, this dispersal of sensors and calculations assures that AGI

73 Abeba Birhane, Jelle van Dijk, and Frank Pasquale. ‘Debunking robot rights metaphysically, ethically, and legally’, *arXiv preprint arXiv:2404.10072* (2024). See also Nick Bostrom, ‘Why I want to be a post-human when I grow up’, in Bert Gordijn, Ruth Chadwick (eds), *Medical enhancement and posthumanity*. Dordrecht: Springer, pp. 107–137, and Émile P. Torres, ‘Against longtermism’, *Aeon*, 19 October 2021, <https://aeon.co/essays/why-longtermism-is-the-worlds-most-dangerous-secular-credo>.

74 Borhane Blili-Hamelin, Christopher Graziul, Leif Hancox-Li, Hananel Hazan, El-Mahdi El-Mhamdi, Avijit Ghosh, Katherine Heller et al. ‘Stop treating AGI as the north-star goal of AI research’, *arXiv preprint arXiv:2502.03689* (2025).

is managed by those who have the power to build and maintain its infrastructure at the expense of mass surveillance and the raw quantification of human lives. It is also envisioned not as an equal, but as a manager of environments, even in the best case scenario. In other words, AGI races, in its enthusiasm, not to decenter the human but to place our extension into a position of authority and dominion.

Some in the X-risk community come tantalizingly close to this realization, while still asserting that AGI is a technology, at the expense of understanding it politically: ‘AI systems will not need to plot for influence if it is freely handed over. As autonomous AI systems increasingly become faster and more cost effective than human workers, a dilemma emerges. Companies, governments, and militaries might be forced to deploy AI systems widely and cut back on expensive human verification of AI decisions, or risk being outcompeted. As a result, autonomous AI systems could increasingly assume critical societal roles’.⁷⁵ But what would it *do*? Many in the AGI community believe the question can be solved through addressing ‘alignment’. Russel, Dewey and Tegmark suggest that ‘the focus is on delivering AI that is beneficial to society and robust in the sense that the benefits are guaranteed: our AI systems must do what we want them to do’.⁷⁶ Who is the ‘we’? In their paper, the answer is that ‘we’ are ‘humanity’. The question then becomes: *who is ‘the human’?*

Without this understanding, the post-human de-emphasis on ‘the human’ becomes a political tool. Decentering the human makes a number of assumptions about who ‘the human’ is, and ‘the human’ is doing a lot of work in AI safety and existential risk. *The humans* must be in control of the system. We must ensure that *the humans* benefit. Meanwhile, ‘alignment’ is a fundamentally technocratic process of assigning goals to a system that will govern others according to those goals. AGI is a political ideology, crafted by a cadre of tech researchers. At the heart of this belief system is an implicit agreement that a tool can and should be used to circumvent debate and negotiation over resources in a purely rational, logical way, so long as it is *sufficiently* rational and logical.

In essence, scale shifts from the individual to ‘the human’ align themselves with attempts to ‘solve’ politics by favorably imagining a world without them. It is the power of abstraction, the antidote

75 Yoshua Bengio, Geoffrey Hinton, Andrew Yao, Dawn Song, Pieter Abbeel, Trevor Darrell, Yuval Noah Harari et al. “Managing extreme AI risks amid rapid progress.” *Science* 384, no. 6698 (2024): 842-845.

76 Stuart Russell, Daniel Dewey, and Max Tegmark. ‘Research priorities for robust and beneficial artificial intelligence’, *AI magazine* 36, no. 4 (2015): 105-114.

to which is the power of specificity. The product of democracy, which is collective decision-making, makes sense to automate at one level of abstraction: consensus can be an object manufactured through a machine, at the expense of the process through which it emerges. In the case of Democracy, AGI offers a solution to minimize social conflict but fails to recognize that social conflict *is* democracy.

AN ARTIFICIAL GENERAL ASSEMBLY

Chantal Mouffe's concept of agonistic pluralism becomes particularly relevant here.⁷⁷ Mouffe argues that political conflict is inherently irreconcilable and that attempts to resolve it by deference to a singular, rational system risks suppressing the vital, ongoing contestation that defines democratic life. By envisioning AGI as the ultimate arbiter of decision-making, we inadvertently echo a technocratic desire for a final consensus—a move that, in a Mouffeian view, undermines the productive nature of political dissent and agency.

Reducing political life to a set of computational procedures neglects the essential nature of democratic engagement. Politics is not simply a technical problem, but an arena of enduring conflict where diverse voices and passions interact. Each human being simultaneously exists individually and within this collective humanity, and at both scales are elements of this emerging global infrastructure. AGI's ideology imagines a static and overly simplified view of political authority—one that ignores the dynamic, contested, and inherently pluralistic character of democratic society, where definitions, needs, and identities constantly shift. By pitting AGI against or in contrast with “humanity,” we assume a collective understanding of our place in the world that unifies vast differences into a single data point. By zooming out from that data point to a governance of ‘humans’, we further flatten the lived reality of billions of people.

Today's political authority is inherently fragile, always in flux, and contested by multiple often conflicting forces. AGI would be a political system in which data and its analysis replaces the agonistic pluralism of democracy, which assumes individuals form smaller collective representations based on individual interests. Already, data and the resources to collect it dictate who frames the questions that determine the best course of social action, limiting the individual's ability to form and articulate

77 In ways that I am certain would annoy most of those previously cited.

their interests. But individually, we also possess an ability to *raise* political consciousness.

Dreams of AGI are today a barely coded fantasy of the end of this system of politics. It is a vision of a global system designed to assign resources according to specific definitions of ‘fairness’ as plotted by alignment specialists. To conceive of AGI as a static embodiment of rationality and control — a final solution — is to overlook the ongoing struggle that characterizes true democratic engagement. As Mouffe writes, ‘For a radical and plural democracy, the belief that a final resolution of conflicts is eventually possible ... is something that puts it at risk’.⁷⁸

Mouffe wrote at a time where people dared to dream of ‘the end of history’. After the Cold War and the birth of the Web came a flood of technocratic beliefs. They asserted that human beings could escape power dynamics through a rational reliance on computational logic: a techno-utopian claim to the end of politics. But as Chantal Mouffe noted, any consensus is temporary:

‘Politics’, on the other hand, indicates the ensemble of practices, discourses and institutions which seek to establish a certain order and organize human coexistence in conditions that are always potentially conflictual because they are affected by the dimension of ‘the political’. I consider that it is only when we acknowledge the dimension of ‘the political’ and understand that ‘politics’ consists in domesticating hostility and in trying to defuse the potential antagonism that exists in human relations, that we can pose what I take to be the central question for democratic politics. This question, pace the rationalists, is not how to arrive at a consensus without exclusion, since this would imply the eradication of the political. Politics aims at the creation of unity in a context of conflict and diversity; it is always concerned with the creation of an ‘us’ by the determination of a ‘them’. The novelty of democratic politics is not the overcoming of this us/them opposition – which is an impossibility – but the different way in which it is established. The crucial issue is to establish this us/them discrimination in a way that is compatible with pluralist democracy.⁷⁹

Mouffe explains that democratic politics must create competition between groups that can radically disagree without destroying one another. Passion is seen as the enemy of rationality, and this explains why the project of rationalist supremacy may be

⁷⁸ Chantal Mouffe, *The Return of the Political*, London: Verso Books, 2020, p.8.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

so fascinated by Artificial Intelligence. The sloppiness of culture and intuition impeded the development of expert systems much in the way it would impede a rational, stable government. Do away with the difficult fuss of humans being human, and things can become much more orderly. Which do you value more: order, or where we are each capable of self-determination, regardless of how many bother to make use of it? In the face of human coordination and resistance, isn't attempting to install a static world a disaster we could see from 1000 years away?

AGI will never be an isolated technological entity. It would inevitably exist within a political sphere that is perennially contested. We have to work with human beings, and politics, and stubborn self-interest, and the constant disappointments of other people. There is no other way to be human. Attempts to resolve the tension of other people through a singular, data-driven authority risks stifling the creative potential of dissent in favor of a generated Domesday.

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ERYK SALVAGGIO

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All too Human? AI and the Paradoxes of Anthropocentrism

SARA BARANZONI

ALL TOO HUMAN?
AI AND THE
PARADOXES OF
ANTHROPOCENTRISM

Since the emergence of generative AI, we've been inundated with messages from tech companies touting it as a tool for the benefit of humanity. The first was OpenAI, defining itself as a 'non-profit artificial intelligence research company' with the goal 'to advance digital intelligence in the way that is most likely to benefit humanity as a whole, unconstrained by a need to generate financial return'.⁸⁰ Then DeepMind Technologies (now Google DeepMind) came along with the mission 'to solve intelligence to advance science and benefit humanity',⁸¹ and Anthropic (whose name is already suggestive in itself) did the same, claiming that they 'strive to make decisions that maximize positive outcomes for humanity in the long run' and 'take seriously the task of safely guiding the world through a technological revolution that has the potential to change the course of human history, and are committed to helping make this transition go well'.⁸² Many other examples could be cited: whether it's putting artificial intelligence at the service of humanity, providing a human approach to the problem, or asserting the centrality of the human factor, variations on the theme are countless. It seems that we are besieged by this 'marketing of the concept of humanity',⁸³ but what does all this mean?

At first glance, this insistence on humanity might seem like a lifeline to get closer to a topic we still struggle to understand, and which fills our imagination with many exaggerations and hyperboles. For instance, these claims might seem to provide a reassuring response to those alarmist voices that predict the disappearance of the human being, its extinction, its replacement, etc. But regardless of the credibility of such scary hypotheses, which

80 Greg Brockman and Ilya Sutskever, 'Introducing OpenAI', *OpenAI blog*, 11 December 2015, <https://openai.com/blog/introducing-openai>.

81 DeepMind Technologies Limited, *Directors' Report and Financial Statements, Financial Year Ended 31 December 2021*, <https://gwrn.net/doc/reinforcement-learning/deepmind/2021-deepmind-fullaccounts.pdf>.

82 Anthropic, <https://www.anthropic.com/company>.

83 See Alessandro Aresu, *Geopolitica dell'intelligenza artificiale*, Milano: Feltrinelli, 2024.

are certainly more effective in terms of affective provocation and rhetorical *dispositio* paradoxically based on a certain solutionist propaganda,⁸⁴ we could actually begin by asking ourselves *who* this human torn between promises of immortality and threats of annihilation is or would be, or rather: *which* human would generative artificial intelligence serve? Or even before questioning the identity of this mysterious figure, we could try to analyse the logic and powers that lie behind such amazing promises, verifying whether their cohesion is such as to constitute a socio-political project or whether they simply reflect some well-known ideology. Or again, if we look closely, we can perhaps understand them as two sides of the same coin.

Indeed, all these discourses seem to imply a certain essentialism. According to them, there would exist on the one hand a humanity that is more or less always identical to itself, regardless of the historical, social, economic, and political context. On the other hand, there would be a series of external elements that, although subject to variation, would always function according to the same logic, and would therefore always enter into relation with the human through a certain modality: that of domination, which can at most be overturned, but not modified. Rooted in a mode of production based on property and on the firm modern insistence on human ends, the paradigm of domination unfolds through the hierarchy of master and servant, where the servant is the means for the master's ends. All this is not only or necessarily 'human': as Matteo Pasquinelli recalls, already for Marx 'the master was no longer an individual', but 'an integrated power made up of "the science, the gigantic natural forces, and the mass of the social labour embodied in the system of machinery"', or, 'as Émile Durkheim recorded at the end of the nineteenth century, the eye of the master evolved as well into new technologies of control such as statistics and the global "operations of capital"'.⁸⁵ The same goes for the slave: whether it is Nature, a machine, a State or a human being, the logic of domination doesn't change.

84 Mainly because these are most of the times launched by the same main players in the AI race. See Sam Schechner and Deepa Seetharaman, 'How Worried Should We Be About AI's Threat to Humanity? Even Tech Leaders Can't Agree', *The Wall Street Journal*, 4 September 2023, <https://www.wsj.com/tech/ai/how-worried-should-we-be-about-ai-threat-to-humanity-even-tech-leaders-cant-agree-46c664b6>.

85 Matteo Pasquinelli, *The Eye of the Master. A Social History of Artificial Intelligence*, London-New York: Verso, 2023, p. 6.

ALL TOO HUMAN?
AI AND THE
PARADOXES OF
ANTHROPOCENTRISM

However, this logic entirely oriented towards human goals also needs means, and over the centuries, technology has been the most precious ally of human beings in their feat of domination. Conceived from an instrumental perspective, technique has in fact been deprived of its status as an object of critical thought and reduced to a means for the persecution of these human objectives, in fact reinforcing anthropocentrism. Indeed, interpreting technics as a means to other ends results in depriving it of an internal causality, attributing this only to the executor, i.e. the subject who uses it. This leads to the affirmation of the neutrality of technics, transferring once again all agency and responsibility to those who use it – humans. In this way, the study of technics as such always manages to be outclassed by the irreducible priority of the human dimension or by a series of moral discourses aimed at judging the ‘virtues’ of a relationship that always runs ‘one-way’ (it is always the human who relates to technique; it is always ‘the use one makes of it’ that differentiates good and bad behaviours). This anthropocentric framework also brings with it a certain dose of schizophrenia, if we think of the large number of critical voices that condemn it and point towards other more ecological theories only to then confirm the same instrumental paradigm in practice.

Now, in order not to confuse these statements with a denial of the importance of a certain account of responsibility in relationships and practices with any element, it is necessary, as proposed by Bernard Stiegler, to make a distinction between the confinement of technics to the status of a means to an end and its particular usefulness.⁸⁶ If the latter possibility is already inscribed in the ontology of technics (a hammer can always be used as an instrument for construction but it is not reduced to it), the ontology itself should go beyond the metaphysical opposition of means to ends, which has no other outcome than falling back into the sterile dialectic between anthropocentrism and technocentrism (i.e. the idea that technics develops ‘for itself’, and that it is an end to itself, with its own law). Indeed, as Gilbert Simondon stated, thanks to this dialectic, ‘Culture has constituted itself as a defense system against technics [... presented] as a defense of man’, exercising at the same time forms of xenophobia and idolatry which only conceal man’s ‘desire for power’. This leads to a contradictory attitude toward technical objects: on the one hand, they are emptied of any meaning and considered as a pure assemblage of matter presenting a utility, on the other hand, they

86 See Stiegler, *Technics and Time*. 1, pp. 24, 92–95, 220.

are seen as ‘robots [...] animated by hostile *intentions* toward man’, and it is precisely to avoid this second possibility that the dream arises ‘of placing machines in the service of man, in the belief that their reduction to slavery is a sure way to prevent any rebellion’.⁸⁷

Not very far from our premises, these words perfectly reveal the complexity of anthropocentrism as the other side of every possible relationship with technics which is rooted in the paradigm of domination. But also, once again according to Simondon, there is a clear misunderstanding of automatism, which is in fact a ‘logical flaw’: commonly presented as the maximum degree of perfection of a machine, automation is rather a lower degree of technical perfection’, as ‘in order to make a machine automatic, one must sacrifice a number of operation possibilities as well as numerous possible usages’. Instead, ‘a purely automatic machine completely closed in on itself in a predetermined way of operating would only be capable of yielding perfunctory results’ which are especially useful in terms of industrial organization.

FANTASIES OF CONTROL

Here’s the key: as Pasquinelli shows, the projects of automation that have arisen (at least) since the nineteenth century and which gave birth to the dreams of cybernetics were inherently linked to the sphere of labour, its organization and its abstraction, and thus ended up feeding ‘a larger technocratic vision of society through [...] calculating machines’.⁸⁸ But if to say that machines specialize in a precise operation, linked to the rationalization of labour, seems to somehow bring the means-ends dialectic back into play, we must consider that in reality ‘Tools are not just means to an end but means that exceed the purpose of their initial design’.⁸⁹ Even if they are designed for a purpose, the acquired experience and knowledge linked to their use open to other possibilities and relationships that go beyond the initial ones. In this sense, the hyper specialization of machines should not be attributed to their nature but to a specific account which has indicated industrial-scale calculation as the most efficient business for pursuing unlimited and unrestricted economic growth. Accordingly, the ‘dream of building thinking automata’ too should not be seen as the pursuit of an ancient obsession, but as an aim that arose with the further

⁸⁷ Gilbert Simondon, *On the Mode of Existence of Technical Objects*, Minneapolis: Univocal Publishing, 2017. For all the following Simondon’s quotes, see pp. 15-17.

⁸⁸ Pasquinelli, *The Eye of the Master*, p. 74.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

development of technical performance.⁹⁰ Seen from another perspective, this also means that computation and computational machines are not products of later industrial capitalism, but they have accompanied it since their unfolding as an optimization and rationalization strategy based on the automation of the division of labour, including mental labour – so that what we call ‘machine intelligence’ proceeds more ‘from the “mindful hands” of workers [...] than royal academies’.⁹¹

Pasquinelli’s theory of automated computation also explains cybernetics as a theory emerging from the analysis of labour and its integration into the machine’s design and a simplification process aimed at the optimization and economization of resources. In other words, a ‘theory of operations’ to represent and manipulate numerical relations to organize the workforce. All of this, allowed by the coupling of ‘abstract energy’ (coal and steam) and ‘abstract form’ (information, or computable knowledge), is indeed the technological infrastructure of an ‘abstract machine’ of control: a pervasive information feedback system that sets up a non-coercive and not rigidly normative form of power such as discipline. Control is not surveillance: indeed, as Gilles Deleuze foresaw,⁹² the control regime no longer tends to have as its objective the segmentation of space and the normalization of individuals, as it is more interested in leaving an apparent freedom of action while it actually modulates behaviours, desires, and interpersonal relationships according to the needs of the market. In this sense, it does not repress and model subjectivities based on norms set once and for all, but it calculates the economic and productive potential to be extracted from every situation and relationship, perfectly in line with the optimization of labour for which its machines are trained. To make this possible, individuals must be reduced to an abstract form, that is, to a set of data that de-subjectivize them, producing what philosopher Antoinette Rouvroy has called the *Homo Numericus*: an entity without identity that coincides with the set of behavioural variables that statistically link it to impersonal but predictive patterns.⁹³

In this sense not only does the datafication of existence and relations as an effect of control dematerialize and short-circuit

90 Ibid., p. 52.

91 Ibid., p. 59.

92 Gilles Deleuze, ‘Postscript on Control Societies’, in Gilles Deleuze, *Negotiations*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1995, pp. 177-182.

93 See Antoinette Rouvroy, ‘Homo juridicus est-il soluble dans les données ?’ In Élise Degrave, Cécile De Terwangne, Séverine Dusollier et al. (eds) *Law, norms and freedoms in cyberspace = Droit, normes et libertés dans le cybermonde : Liber Amicorum Yves Poullet*, Bruxelles : Larcier, 2018, pp. 417-444.

political instances, reducing their unpredictability, but through the modulation of preferences, tendencies and behaviours it also brings governmental effects to emerge, in line with what Rouvroy has described as ‘algorithmic governmentality’,⁹⁴ dissolving with it the traditional principles that define *homo juridicus* as a subject of law. Nevertheless, it would be improper to talk about a real government, since ‘algorithms, which obviously have no intentionality of their own, only “govern” to the extent that we give up governing ourselves, by subcontracting to these machines the responsibility of making decisions that fall back to us’.⁹⁵

Rouvroy claims that in this situation neither explicit forms of discipline nor the definition of an overall subjectivity are even necessary anymore. Nevertheless, we are convinced that this innovative form of power is such precisely because it is completed with new forms of discipline that effectively weaken possible forms of resistance, so that the activities that generate the statistical schemes of *homo numericus* as an aggregate of potential tendencies can be transformed into actual labour, making of this *homo* a precise cog in the value producing machine. But what are the particular characteristics of this pseudo-subject, whose tasks are entirely oriented towards maintaining the system that produces it?

THE HOMO MANUTENTOR OF AUTOMATIC SOCIETY

Despite cybernetic ideologies and reductionisms, which present the dangers of the current situation as ineluctable, this cannot be attributed to a natural evolution of algorithmic culture but to its complex intertwining with other ‘organs’, made possible by grammatization as a cultural technique, or as the general tendency towards analytical division and organization, which unfolds through modelling and construction of schemes. In other words, a technique of abstraction within which algorithmic culture is just a phase. In any case, as Stiegler has shown,⁹⁶ the insistence on this ‘state of fact’ and the impossibility of calling it into question led us to what he called an ‘Automatic Society’: an increasingly automated society that leads to a weakening of social, symbolic and spiritual relationships to the point of becoming a *dis-society*. In this milieu, it seems that everything falls prey of what Luciano

94 See Antoinette Rouvroy and Thomas Berns, ‘Algorithmic governmentality and prospects of emancipation. Disparateness as a precondition for individuation through relationships?’, *Réseaux – Algorithmic Policies* (2013/1): 163-196.

95 Rouvroy, ‘Homo juridicus est-il soluble dans les données ?’, p. 443.

96 See Bernard Stiegler, *Automatic Society. Volume 1. The Future of Work*, Cambridge: Polity, 2016.

Floridi defined as ‘digital envelopment’, a concept that expresses the progressive transformation of human environments, from domestic to institutional ones, through a design increasingly tailored to data extraction and calculation and as a function of optimizing the performance of algorithmic operations.⁹⁷ According to Floridi, it will therefore not be Artificial Intelligence that will become increasingly similar to humans or even more intelligent. Rather, it will be the environments and humans themselves that will be increasingly compatible with it, even to the point of adapting to its needs. So, the risk related to today’s acceleration of envelopment is not only the reduction of the existential possibilities of these environments to a range of options pre-oriented to the extraction of data and statistical patterns, but also the calculation and commodification of every area of life, up to the point where new types of subjectivity appear as a result of the need to satisfy the goal of society’s total automation. The ways in which humans enter this mechanism are multiple: as influenceable customers, whose attention is captured by ‘free’ online services, i.e. the currency with which customer information is purchased; as invisible workers, who become means of digital production, as with Amazon’s Mechanical Turk; as promoters and inventors of oneself, so that to build (and become) one’s profile one is willing to give up a lot. In any case, the fact that humans become the means to achieve this goal seems to bring about an extraordinary reversal of the servant-master dialectic, to the point where promoting AI as ‘at the service of humanity’ seems comical.

Here then is the amazing new product that must be sold free of charge to the influenceable customer – here is the new human, too human, presented on stage with its functions, made desirable and already desired even before discovering its possible flaws: the *Homo Manutentor* (maintenance man). A man who has only one task: not so much to serve the machine, but to stay with it as long as they can, to let it work without criticizing it, thus fuelling the rationalization of the world. Once they become a staggering cog in the perfect interweaving of capitalism, politics and technology, their work is thus resolved in the efficiency-driven operating system, without rest or conflict.

If the invention of a new humanity would seem to reunite the human with the dimension of finality, however, we must not forget that *Homo Manutentor* is also part of the mechanism that he himself contributes to oiling. Here then is the paradoxical synthesis of this means–ends dialectic: in this (not completely)

97 Luciano Floridi, *The Ethics of Artificial Intelligence. Principles, Challenges, and Opportunities*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 25–30.

naive project of humanity and society implemented without there being a true general project or an awareness of the results, the human is as much an end as a means, or a means as much as an end. The *means* for the production of economic value but also the *means* for the *end* of his own production as a *means*, presented by AI companies as the most desirable *end* (so desirable as to allow a paradoxical divestment of the philanthropic intentions and the non-profit dimension contained in the founding documents, because such a project certainly requires an accumulation of power and resources that is ill-suited to such noble principles). Companies that end up proposing themselves as a ‘well-organized department to put out the fire that they must and want to continue to fuel’, or, in other words, as ‘Humanity Gigolos’.⁹⁸ But proclaiming the concept of humanity and monopolizing this word in a technopolitical or rather techno-commercial context means conceiving it as a unitary and unifying product in the same techno-commercial terms that describe it, to the extent that this power of reorganization through the concept of humanity, instead of its necessary and desirable political reinvention, implies that there are guardians of this concept, who decide centrally to whom it can or cannot be applied. In a scenario where AI is promoted as the greatest salvation but also as the greatest danger, who better than those who hold this concept, that is, big tech corporations, can protect us ... from themselves and their definition of humanity?

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ALL TOO HUMAN?
AI AND THE
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Biographies

BIOGRAPHIES

Sara Baranzoni holds a PhD in Theatre and Film Studies from the University of Bologna. After working at the Universidad de las Artes del Ecuador (2015-2022), she currently collaborates with the Faculty of Philosophy at the Pontifical University Antonianum in Rome, where she is also pursuing a PhD in Philosophy. Her research and teaching focuses on contemporary philosophy, philosophy of technology and aesthetics, research methodologies in art and humanities, and political ecology. Co-founder of the philosophy journal *La Deleuziana*, she is the author of numerous essays in various languages, as well as a translator of contemporary philosophy.

Claudio Celis Bueno is an Assistant Professor in New Media and Digital Cultures at the University of Amsterdam. He is the author of *The Attention Economy: Labour, Time and Power in Cognitive Capitalism*, and several academic articles. His current research focuses on the relation between AI and labour from a (post)Marxist perspective. He also coordinates the *AI and Cultural Production* research group at the Amsterdam School for Cultural Analysis and co-coordinates the *AIsymmetries* research project.

Rob Horning is a former editor of *Real Life*, a magazine about technology and society. His writing has appeared in a variety of art and technology publications, including *Art in America*, *Art Review*, *The New Inquiry*, and *Spike*. He currently writes *Internal Exile*, an occasional newsletter about the social impact of AI.

Deniz Johns is a Turkish/British artist and interdisciplinary researcher, whose work bridges art theoretical analysis, film criticism, and practice-based investigations in film, video, and performance. With a specialisation in moving image practices of 20th-century Avant-garde and Experimental Cinema, her broader research engages with political aesthetics in contemporary art. Central to her inquiry are questions around the representation of the oppressed and the power relations between artwork and viewer, especially in relation to race, gender identity, and agency. In parallel, her practice-based research explores the radical political potential of image negation—through absence, distortion, or deconstruction—as a strategy to subvert dominant visual cultures and foster radical spectatorship.

Jernej Markelj is a Lecturer in New Media and Digital Culture at the University of Amsterdam and a researcher at the University of Ljubljana. His research, which has been published in various journals and collected volumes, focuses on networked affect, agentic imaginaries, and online gender.

Eryk Salvaggio (cyberneticforests.com) is an award-winning artist and AI researcher. He is a Gates Scholar at the University of Cambridge examining the intersection of AI and the humanities.

Martin Zeilinger is an Austrian, Scotland-based cultural theorist and artistic researcher with interdisciplinary interests in digital art, AI, the political economies of new media, posthumanism, experimental videogames, and cycling scholarship. He works as Reader in Computational Arts & Technology at Abertay University (Dundee/UK), and is also affiliated with the Orpheus Institute for Advanced Studies & Research in Music (Gent/BE). In 2025-2026, Martin holds a Senior Fellowship at the International Research Center for Cultural Studies (Vienna/AUT), to undertake a project exploring the labour conditions of non-player characters in mainstream videogames. <https://marjz.net/>

As machine learning algorithms are delegated with more and more tasks, the capacities that were historically considered signs of human exceptionalism become increasingly less persuasive. Composing a song, making a managerial or moral decision, or providing emotional support can now be outsourced to an algorithmically-powered machine. These operations are based on large-scale statistical aggregations in which pattern recognition is being deployed to manage individuals as pure data points and vectorial movements. As these procedures distribute authority, profit and privilege in ways that often by-pass human subjectivity, they throw into crisis the established ways of comprehending the relation between technology, individuals, and power.

This collected volume brings together authors who engage with the politics of (non) human agency that shape our present moment. Our interrogation proceeds by asking the following questions: how to expand the notion of agency beyond the boundaries of human sovereign action, while still accounting for power relations that remain human, all too human?; how to avoid the stale opposition between a humanist defense of human exceptionalism and the ideological promises of a technological singularity which simply reproduce an anthropocentric account of agency?; how to address the growing role of technology in contemporary society without falling prey to reductive techno-determinist or instrumentalist narratives?; how do our fantasies of control over our technologies and our belief in their neutrality undermine our efforts to organise our societies in more equitable ways?

INC network notion #4

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Institute of Network Cultures
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