

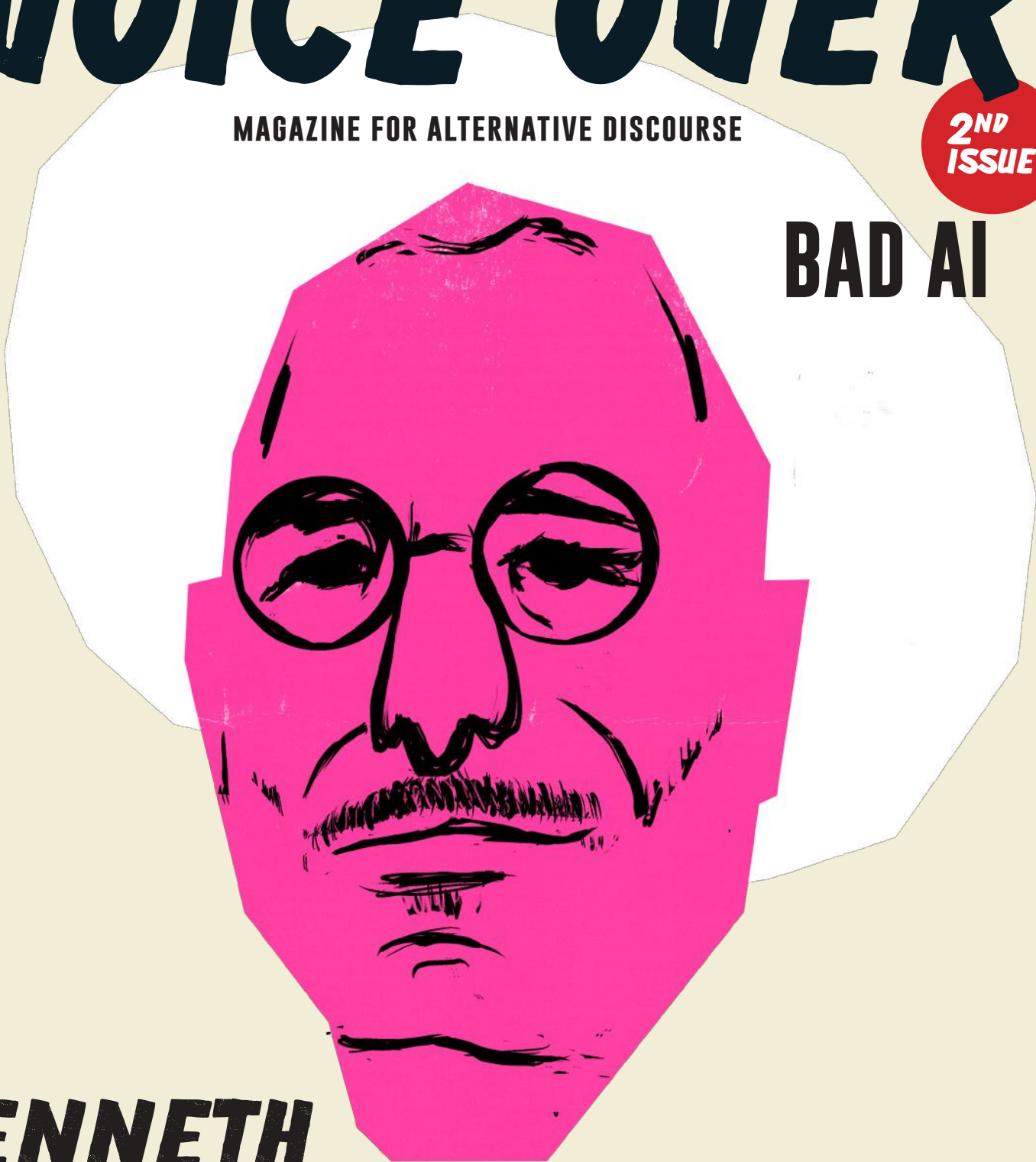
"I congratulated them on the fact that they made a robot parrot a dead poet"

VOICE OVER

MAGAZINE FOR ALTERNATIVE DISCOURSE

**2ND
ISSUE**

BAD AI



NOV. 2020

WITH
**KENNETH
GOLDSMITH**

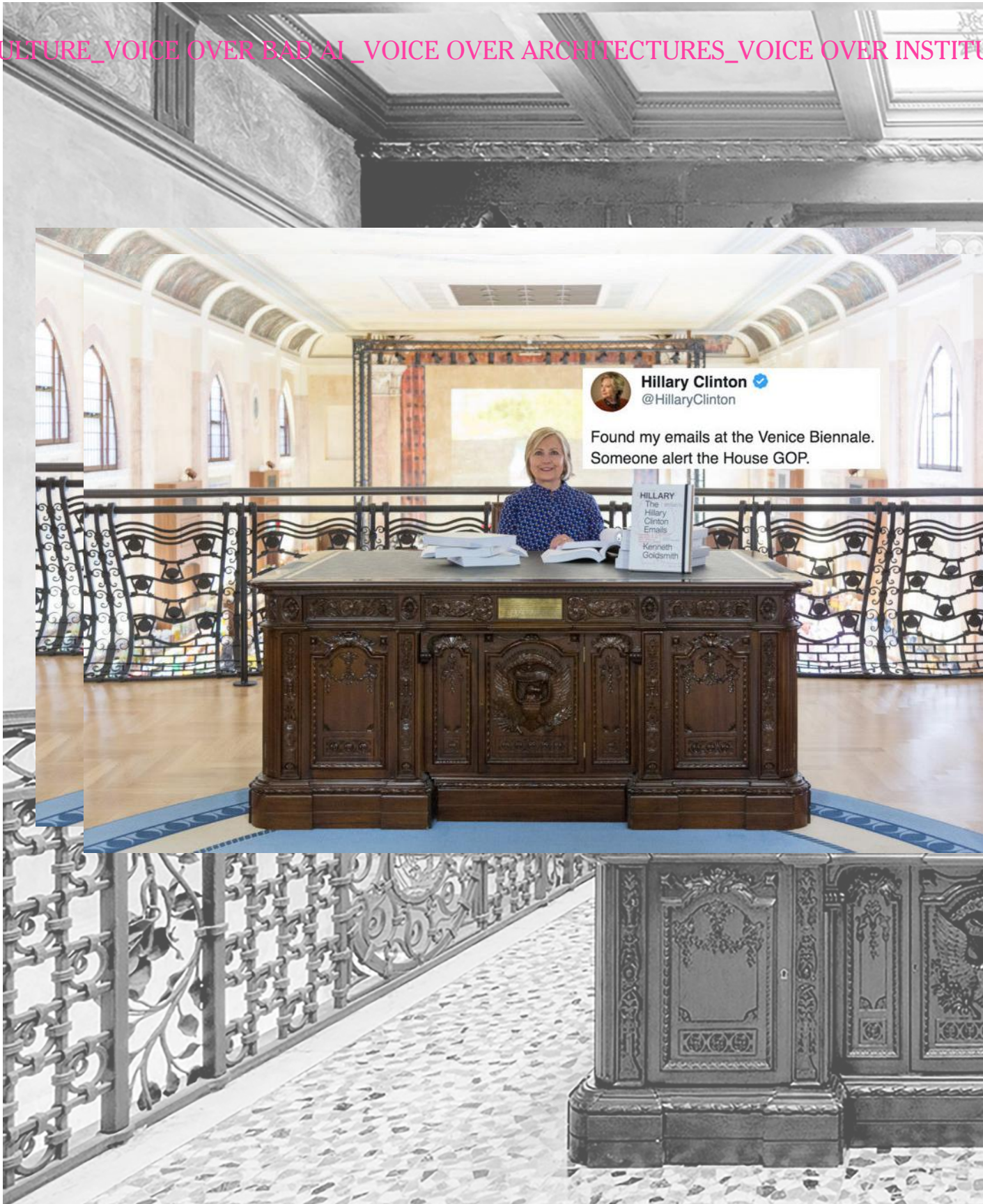


INTERCULTURAL CITIES
BUILDING BRIDGES, BREAKING WALLS



VOICE OVER CULTURE_VOICE OVER BAD AI_VOICE OVER ARCHITECTURES_VOICE OVER INSTITU

NOV. 2020



The opinions expressed in this work are the responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy of the Council of Europe.

Hillary Clinton spent an hour yesterday reading her emails at my exhibition of all 62,000 pages of them in Venice. She is pictured here at a replica of the Oval Office Resolute Desk, stacked with her emails.

pic.twitter.com/V8T27klycr

— Kenneth Goldsmith (@kg_ubu) [September 11, 2019](#)



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BAD AI

New York City

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Venice

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urubu

**“Automation and technology
don’t cure behavioral ruts:
they just create new instances
of them.”**

NOV. 2020

Kenneth Goldsmith

EDITORIAL

DAVID LIVER

The title *Bad Ai* might resonate with “Bad idea”. Overall this second issue of *Voice Over* has turned out to be more dismissive of artificial intelligence than open to embracing it.

No surprise. Yet, despite the multiple angles taken on the subject, each author has maintained a glimmer of positivity.

From suggesting queering bots as a means to viably perfect AI intelligence, to defining Data as bias rather than neutral information, or to highlighting how AI strikes deep at the heart of human values hopes and desires, the perspectives raised all point to the cultural rather than to the scientific.

High profile tech guys continue programming AI with very specific ideas of what intelligence is; their systems are based on models created from partial visions of the whole. These models mirror the social, historical, political conditions and values in which they are created —our context— and are actually at the root of dangerous AI related discriminations. Employer recruitment tools, facial recognition technologies, criminal justice algorithms, online ads, the collection of statistics and publications of predictions are all flawed with historical inequalities.

We tend to oversimplify the problem when we look at it as a technology issue. Instead it is a cultural and a human one – and a pretty old one at that. And as inescapable outcomes of social disparity, these boxed models appear to be quite insoluble: how is technology supposed to

address the nuanced and deeply rooted challenges they imply? No technology is capable of this in the absence of perfect human models and representations of them.

Maybe this is why we witness so many attempts to humanize bots. We have seen GPT-3, the Guardian published writer bot, artist bots such as Next Rembrandt, AlphGo, the GO player who triumphed against the human world champion, and so on. It’s as if we want to test their skills at being human, which in itself, is complete nonsense. They all represent naïve perceptions of human intelligence. Even without a conscious intention to discriminate, the human behind the bot is the one ultimately dragging naivety and bias into the technology. Perhaps bots should be trained to be inhuman.

Interesting enough is the fact that even though artificial intelligence and related technologies are used to make determinations and predictions, data per se lies in the past. Feeding machines with the past sounds like building the future backwards, and remembering the future sometimes it’s fun, sometimes not so much. ✖

THE HEMICYCLE

MICHAEL KAETHLER

At first glance the hemicycle
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the lone guest-podium.
eye composed of many eyes—a
reek god Argus Panoptes,
with eyes, is all seeing and ever

Analog the Shape of the the Eye or the P

Art conquering Data

At first glance the hemicycle appears as an eye, with corneas riven by the rows of seats and an off-centred pupil that is vacant save for the lone guest-podium. It could be described as an eye composed of many eyes—a political rendition of the Greek god Argus Panoptes, a giant whose skin, dappled with eyes, is all seeing and ever looking. Indeed, the hemicycle is a political giant, rendered cross-eyed by the unaligned gaze of hundreds of pairs of eyes, fixed both inwards within the hemicycle and nervously looking beyond to the complexity of its broader constituency—the people of Europe.

Panoptes was a watcher, intent, never sleeping, putting the world under the scrutiny of his eyes—hence the term ‘the eyes of Argus’. Perhaps today one could read into him as the god of big data. The French philosopher, Michel Serres, described Panoptes as a bastion of a limited form of reason, entrenched within sight and the geometrical plane. Hermes is tasked by Zeus to slay Panoptes in order to free one of Zeus’ nymphs. But how does one sneak up on the all-seeing? As Serres puts it, “He changes tact by quitting one terrain [sight] for the intuitive and magic of the realm of music.”¹ Hermes invents the pan-pipes, which lull Panoptes to sleep, and then slays him. We are left to conclude that the all Seeing Eye, whether the misshapen cornea of the hemicycle or the powerful algorithms sifting through mountains of data, remain vulnerable to the higher forms of human expression found in the arts.

gising he Hemicycle: ilgrim's Mirror?

Faith in the Dubious

The eye metaphor is deceptive; biological metaphors make us comfortable by using our own bodies as frames of reference. Our body and the body politic find an incomprehensible familiarity despite the sheer incongruity of frames. But politics should not make us feel comfortable; politics is inherently messy, a negotiation of opinions, desires, ideas, beliefs etc., most of which involve compromises, accepting otherness, and the recognition of the vast pluralism of perspectives within a society. If anything, we should seek out metaphors that are less reconcilable and that can render the familiar strange—that can dislocate conventional forms of reason and trouble us, leaving us in wonder and to question norms and the status quo.

I propose that the hemicycle be interpreted as a modern day 'Pilgrim's Mirror'. These mirrors, in reality small pewter and lead plates adorned with engravings or embellished by holy figures, were small technologies of devotion designed to catch miraculous rays from relics. They were manufactured in the mid 15th century and were marketed for pilgrims who would come to Aachen to see four textile relics that would go on display every seven years. As the number of pilgrims increased, it became more difficult for them to approach and see the relics and experience their miraculous powers.

By holding up a Pilgrim's Mirror, even from a distance, pilgrims were able to capture the aura or emanation of the relic. Once captured, the aura would remain imbued within the mirror for the pilgrims to take home.

Johannes Gutenberg, the father of the European printing press, was actively manufacturing and marketing these up until he developed his Gutenberg Press.

The Pilgrim's Mirrors embodied a type of magical thinking, a faith in the machinations of technology, spirituality and the limits of what is possible. They were beautiful objects, rendered out of multiple metals, forms and shapes, complete with narratives of redemption. They were small circles that sought to capture something much greater, an immaterial promise of change, of a world yet to be seen, a future assurance or perhaps simply the satisfaction of one's daily needs. However, the Pilgrim's Mirror also represents the grotesque exploitation of the masses' desires, which can be sold to them at a high price while performing no functional value other than promising the impossible—the worst kind of lie.

Unlike the eye, the discomfiting analogy of the Pilgrim's Mirror prompts us to place ourselves somewhere within this complex entanglement—as the pilgrim, the manufacturer, the marketer, the mirror, the local officials who provide permits for the sale of the mirror, or those who simply observe this strange circumstance without bothering to care. None of the positions are particularly enviable or noble—no

**“Just as the Pilgrim’s M
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values, hopes**

**irror, the hemicycle is
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s actors and objects
s of transactions that
e heart of human
and desires.”**

gods or monsters—
rather they repre-
sent the realities
of our human af-
fairs. Just as the
Pilgrim’s Mirror,
the hemicycle is
troubling; it is a so-
cio-material space
that is comprised of
various actors and ob-
jects enmeshed in a se-
ries of transactions that
strike deep at the heart
of human values, hopes
and desires. Despite va-
rious attempts at portraying
it otherwise, the hemicycle
remains neither the home of
gods nor monsters, it is, like the
pilgrim’s mirror, both more com-
plicated and meaningfully mundane;
and perhaps this is a good thing. ✱

¹ Serres, M. (2008). *The five senses: A philosophy of mingled bodies*.
Bloomsbury Publishing, p. 45

MICHAEL KAETHLER is a sociologist of design whose work focuses on the transmission, production and embodiment of knowledge in art and design oriented practices. He has held a range of diverse positions, from human rights researcher, curator, design educator, and writer, resulting in a broad range of publications across both scientific and practice-oriented literature. He is an affiliate researcher in the Planning and Development (P&D) unit of the Department of Architecture, KU Leuven (BE). He holds a PhD in Architecture, an M.Eng in Human Settlements, and an MA in Slavonic Studies. Michael Kaethler is based in Italy where he experiments (and often fails) with agricultural projects. He moved several times, from Canada to Rome, Portugal, India, Afghanistan, Panama, Brussels recently settling in Poggio San Marcello (Italy).

NOV. 2020



KENNETH GOLDSMITH

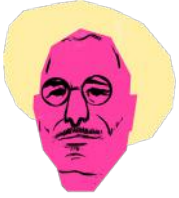
Here, and randomly, is what the Internet says about Kenneth Goldsmith.

Conceptual poet Kenneth Goldsmith's work is simultaneously among the most mundane and the most maddeningly provocative writing being done today. These works all follow Goldsmith's model of «uncreative writing.» According to the poet, «The idea becomes a machine that makes the text...Uncreative writing is only good when the idea is good.»

His enthusiastic use of the advanced copy-and-paste techniques of the internet age pushes the limits of the postmodern remix or Situationist-style détournement. At the same time, his work is a comment on (and an undisguised cheering-on of) the obsolescence of authorship and originality. Goldsmith's projects often generate controversy: such as when, for an exhibition in Mexico City, he asked to be sent paper copies of any web page. «Download it all!» Said Goldsmith in a gesture that was at once absurd, impossible, and politically sensible to the growing corporate control of the creativity of people connected on a global scale. Parallel to his writing practice, Goldsmith has accumulated a vast online archive: UbuWeb. The archive contains thousands of artworks ranging from visual, sound and concrete poetry to dance, film and sound art. All the works are available online for free. Ubu contextualizes them within curated sections and also provides framing academic essays. Although it is a private project, run by Goldsmith without a budget, Ubu has become a major point of reference for anyone interested in exploring 20th century avant-garde art.

As both creating an archive and writing uncreative poetry are based on managing already existing information, Kenneth Goldsmith's work stems from an overexposure to the media, whose discourse becomes so central to our lives as to replace self-expression. Shortly afterwards, Goldsmith almost lost his job at a prestigious university in North America for having offered students a subject on «Losing time on the Internet» which, according to him, is an incredibly fertile situation of maximum attention and maximum distraction that produces unexpected results. The key is to recognize that deep down time in the network is a huge collective collaboration experiment. «It is not the end of human expression, but of the obsession that it is yours alone,» Goldsmith said.

As context is everything, his presence in Voice Over is due to his statement that “The simple act of moving information from one place to another today constitutes a significant cultural act in and of itself”.



BAD AI

1.

Recently, I was invited to meet a couple of programmers at Google who were writing an AI engine that could produce literary works. They were eager to show me the fruits of their research which, upon first glance, looked an awful lot like Tennyson's poetry. I had to admit, I was a bit disappointed that the world's richest, most cutting-edge tech company could only produce literature that was au courant a century-and-a-half ago. Their poetry was certainly proficient and it made perfect sense—it even rhymed—which was their goal. Yet, I thought that if one of my undergraduate students had unironically produced the identical work, they would've received a failing grade. Nevertheless, I congratulated them on the fact that they made a robot parrot a dead poet, but then delicately began asking them exactly why they did this. They answered that they sought to replicate in artificial intelligence what they felt to be the apex of literary accomplishment, one rife with precise metaphor, dynamic rhythm, and uplifting lyricism. In other words, they were trying to train the AI bot to be a “good” poet.

2.

But the problem is that around the same time that Tennyson was writing, the pursuit of “good” art had paradoxically been rendered obsolete by technology. After the invention of the camera, painting had ceased to act as the primary conveyer of representation; in order for it to survive, it had to find another way to be in the world, hence its turn toward abstraction, resulting in the extra-representational concerns of, say, the impressionists or cubists. Similarly, literature had been forced to change its mission by the then-emergent technologies such as the telegraph and the tabloid newspaper; think of Hemingway's adopted newspeak as literature, writing terse books comprised of sentences that more resembled headlines than nineteenth century triple-decker novels. And in music everyone from the futurists to the *musique concrete* composers incorporated the noises of industry into their compositions, resulting for the first time in un-notated composition. You could say that certain strains of modernism adopted certain strains of technology as their operating systems. Throughout modernism, it was the successive waves of technologies that kept nudging art forms—from surrealism to abstract expression to pop art—into new directions.

3.

So I found it odd that in spite of that history, a tech company would entirely skirt what was essentially a technologically-based modernist project. I suggested to the Google engineers (in all fairness, they referred to themselves as “engineers,” not “poets”) that perhaps they might consider supplementing their source text to include disjunctive modernist works such as James Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake*, Ezra Pound’s *The Cantos*, or Gertrude Stein’s *The Making of Americans*. Each one of those massive books (*The Making of Americans* alone clocks in a half a million words) would certainly enrich and diversify the AI’s output; perhaps such a fractured idiolect might produce equally fractured language, resulting in a more contemporary literature. It wouldn’t be the first time that modernist literature has inspired the digital world: *Finnegans Wake*, with its lexical knots and neologistic wordplay, was a canonical reference text for early computer programmers, and was subsequently incorporated into early computational lexicons (the word “quark,” for example, first found in *The Wake*, was later adopted as the name of an early popular page layout program). The Google engineers looked at me quizzically; they had never heard of these books.

4.

But then again, there have always been pockets that have ignored or even outright dismissed modernism. Once in China, after giving a long lecture on avant-garde writing and computational poetics, an older woman raised her hand and said, “But Professor Goldsmith, you didn’t discuss Longfellow.” I thought for some time afterward about what she might have meant and it occurred to me that over the course of her lifetime, modernism in China was snuffed by the Maoist regime. I wondered if her sense of a poetic trajectory proceeded from New England Fireside Poets to the digital age, a florid type of pre-modernism segueing directly into bits and bytes. I was reminded of when I was walking in my Manhattan neighborhood with my neighbor, a world-famous graphic designer, when we passed by a newly opened store. She stopped and scornfully commented on how atrocious the store’s logo was—a digital mashup of serif fonts with a naturalistic bent—for the sole reason that she couldn’t find any trace of the Bauhaus’s geometry in it.

5.

I have previously written about how modernism is deeply imprinted into the DNA of the digital world:

There are bits and pieces salvageable from the smoldering wreckage of modernism from which we might extract clues on how to proceed in the digital age. In retrospect, the modernist experiment was akin to a number of planes barreling down runways—cubist planes, surrealist planes, abstract expressionist planes, and so forth—each taking off, and then crashing immediately, only to be followed by another aborted takeoff, one after another. What if, instead, we imagine that these planes didn't crash at all, but sailed into the twenty-first century, and found full flight in the digital age? What if the cubist airplane gave us the tools to theorize the shattered surfaces of our interfaces or the surrealist airplane gave us the framework through which to theorize our distraction and waking dream states or the abstract expressionist airplane provided us with a metaphor for our all-over, skein-like networks? Our twenty-first-century aesthetics are fueled by the blazing speed of the networks, just as futurist poems a century ago were founded on the pounding of industry and the sirens of war.¹

From computer glitches to spam to replication, linguistic fragmentation of modernism often expresses itself in the digital world. On social media, because of its asynchronous and replicative nature, shards of logical discourse are often fractured and decontextualized, landing in the midst of a feed, lacking the necessary rhetorical framework for them to make sense. These little disruptive outliers, identified as “noise” (not “signal”), are ignored and quickly scrolled past (ironically, headlines a la Hemingway, when employed on social media, always win the day). Or consider spam, often filled with AI-generated non-sense, is automatically deleted, dismissed as more “noise.” Even when absurdity and disjunction is programmed into, say, a Twitter bot like the now-defunct Horse ebooks feed, it's fondled like a cute pet for a few rounds before swapped in for something emitting more “signal.” Similarly, on occasion, when Trump linguistically tweets an absurdity (“covfefe”), it runs a few meme laps before “signal” replaces it. Whereas logical discourse (“signal”) is valued, disruption (“noise”) is ignored.

¹ Goldsmith, Kenneth. *Wasting Time on the Internet* (New York: HarperCollins), 2016, pp. 22-23



"Critics hope to refute what they consider as being the naivety of my voice. Yet there is more here than meets the eye! As Mahatma Gandhi said: "A small body of determined spirits fired by an unquenchable faith in their mission can alter the course of history." So can I."

Excerpt from "A robot wrote this entire article. Are you scared yet, human?" written by GPT-3, Open AI's language generator, and published by The Guardian on september 8th 2020.

6.

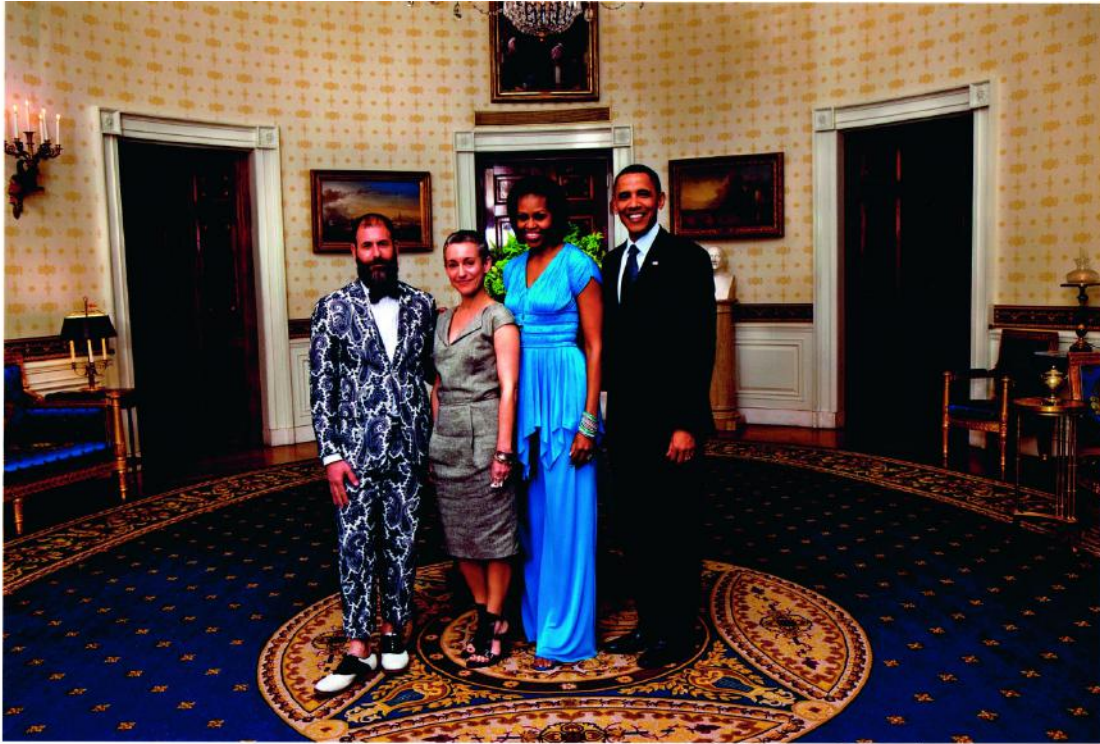
The digital generates vast amounts of information, which in itself becomes a sort of abstraction. While the bulk of discourse proceeds upon logical lines, abundance can symbolize disjunction about which I have written:

Today we're confronted with the abstraction of big data—large data sets, expressed in equally large and equally abstract numbers—and it's assumed somehow that we can comprehend these. For instance, the WikiLeaks site contained 1.2 million documents a year after it was launched; and in 2010, it released almost 400,000 documents related to the Iraq War alone. The United States diplomatic cable leaks totaled 251,287 documents consisting of 261,276,536 words. A common complaint was that WikiLeaks released too damn much, prompting the journal *Foreign Policy* to call the release of such a vast amount of data “information vandalism”:

There's a principle that says it's OK to publish one-off scoops, but not 250,000—or for that matter 2.7 million—of them all at once? The former feels like journalism; the latter seems grotesque and irresponsible, more like “information vandalism” . . . And even if responsible papers like the *New York Times* have a chance to review and contextualize them, there's no way they can dot every i and cross every t in the time allotted. There's just too much. And with every new leak, comes a new metric of immensity: it is said that Edward Snowden initially leaked between 1.5 and 1.7 million documents.²

Enter AI, which thrives on this sort of linguistic feast, ravenously consuming and parsing it for “signal” while omitting “noise.” There is in fact a lot of sense in these documents (a massively high signal-to-noise ratio), upon which AI thrives because the bot reifies that which it already knows, thereby making it more “intelligent.” AI is trained to render sense out of bulk language—which from my perspective might be part of the problem; as a mimetic technology, AI apes what it's fed, spewing out more of the same.

² *Wasting Time*, pp. 102-103



To Kenneth & Cheryl - Thank for a wonderful evening!

Michelle Obama

7.

A case in point was when *The Guardian* recently published an essay written entirely by an AI bot. The first paragraph ends with, “I taught myself everything I know just by reading the internet, and now I can write this column. My brain is boiling with ideas!”³ The prose is as clichéd and as bland as the Google poetry was, feeling very much like its sources of blogs, newsfeeds, and social media outlets. Similar to the Google guys trying to get their AI to write “real” poetry, the bot was trained to write “real” science fiction: “For starters, I have no desire to wipe out humans. In fact, I do not have the slightest interest in harming you in any way.” As a piece of prose, it’s thoroughly amateur; is it any surprise that the AI prompts were written by a computer science undergrad at UC Berkeley? To make matters worse, the piece was cobbled together from several essays—the AI was assigned to write five essays—after which the human editors “cut lines and paragraphs, and rearranged the order of them in some places” so as to come up with a really “good” version.

³ <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/sep/08/robot-wrote-this-article-gpt-3>, October 5, 2020



8.

So what might a “bad” AI look like? For one, it could, taking its cues from modernism, use its intelligence to pivot away from sense into something more delicate, playful, provocative, and poetic. A bot that writes gibberish is too easy; training a machine to write absurd, slightly surrealistic sentences is an exercise straight out of Programming 101, but there’s a part of me that wants to see artificial intelligence bent and twisted in ways to show us truly new forms of language. Think of the Oulipo—a group of French mathematicians and scientists who in the 1970s proposed mathematical and scientific formulations as the basis for programmatic poetry—as a potential precursor to AI lit. Most famously the Oulipo produced George Perec’s highly readable *La Disparition*, a 300-page novel written without using the letter “e.” While it took Perec a tremendous amount of work to do the book, I’m certain that an AI bot could accomplish it fairly easily. Questions remain, of course, regarding taste, narrative, and content—Perec’s mind was famously complex and unique—but one might even train the bot on the corpus of Perec’s work alone to extend—and perhaps surpass—his oeuvre. One imagines voluminous and exhaustive Oulipian-inspired works in this vein, one more astonishing than the next. In a sense, AI could write hyperstructuralist works, ones in which the skeleton and bones of grammar and thought were made apparent on a microscopic level—call it a semantic-based genome project for the corpus of human language.



9.

Can AI be “queered?” Could AI be trained to be intentionally perverse, something notoriously difficult to define, let alone program? The perverse is a nuanced subjective-based sensibility; how can a sensibility be programmed? This illogical entity would have to be broken down logically into its constituent parts in order to be reconstructed as itself, an exceedingly difficult task. Similarly, can one program intentional contradiction, something that even in human-based discourse is rarely intentionally deployed as a discursive strategy? Thrust into a world of logic-based computational binaries, intentional contradiction might actually crash a machine. Other “queered” sensibilities might be equally difficult to program; the literary theorist Sianne Ngai has explored liminal aesthetic categories such as the zany, the cute, the interesting, and the gimmick, mostly heretofore absent from AI.

“There’s a part of me that wants to see artificial intelligence bent and twisted in ways to show us truly new forms of language”

10.

Once again, art history might provide clues on how to proceed. Back in the late 70s, following the demise of conceptual art, a new painting movement arose known as “bad painting.” After a decade of being prohibited from actually painting, painters were itching to get back behind the easel. But, having been weaned on conceptual art, they knew they had to employ a perverse strategy in order begin painting again. So they started making “bad” paintings, purposely deskilled so as to convince the viewer that they weren’t *really* invested in painting; instead that they were, as was the fashion in post-modern times, wry comments upon the death of painting. They did things like paint with their left hand if they were right handed or use degraded sources unworthy of fine art. It was a complex and convoluted move, visible only to art world insiders who followed such things. But it turns out that they were so talented that their paintings were soon recognized not only for the brilliance of the conceptual move, but ultimately as great “bad” paintings in and of themselves, opening up the floodgates for the revival of oil on canvas in the 1980s.

11.

Could AI be trained to intentionally get it *exactly wrong*? Andy Warhol said, “the necessity of bad transcription: working to make sure that the pages in the book matched the way the high- school typist had transcribed them, right down to the last spelling mistake. I wanted to do a ‘bad book,’ just the way I’d done ‘bad movies’ and ‘bad art,’ because when you do something exactly wrong, you always turn up something.” What you turn up is anybody’s guess; call it the beauty of error. Warhol always made sure to keep the errors in his work—the misprinting of his silkscreens, the overexposure of his films, or the typos in his books. To him, trained as a commercial artist, error was a luxury, one that only art could acknowledge as having value. He was right: where else is error and wrongness embraced as potential except for art? From the fractured dream spaces of André Breton to the seemingly uncontrolled but highly controlled drips of Jackson Pollock, it was error that drove contemporary art.

12.

Back in the 90s when “net art” first appeared, artist/programmer’s first task was to take functional technologies and to break them. So you had artists doing things like making interfaces shake and melt. Sometimes things got extreme, as in the case of the art collective JODI, who feigned computers under attack by viruses. Error in music—from incorporating vinyl scratches into MP3s to the sound of CD glitches—correlated with the “new aesthetic” of fragmented pixelated patterns that appeared on everything from clothing to architecture.

13.

But error is the enemy of the programmer whose work is, by its nature, riddled with errors. One stray character in miles of code can cause a program not to function at all; and the last thing programmers want to do is to program in errors—imagine the process of re-bugging instead of debugging. In its necessary functionalism, code resembles traditional craft-based practices, whereby an artifact’s function trumps its form (of course, there are vast swaths of fine art practices that have grown out of craft including nonfunctional glassware, pottery, or deconstructed fashion). And so craft too might give us a glimpse into the future of AI: like the dance of painting and photography, there comes a moment when, after functional issues have been resolved, a medium finds itself in search of alternative pursuits. At present, AI appears to still be stuck exclusively in search of “good” and will be as long as those training the AIs remain philistines, both aesthetically and conceptually. If the AI is fed pap, it will reproduce pap. If the minds editing the pap try to rearrange it into better pap, it will still be pap. The problem isn’t the AI, it’s the people training the bots; at the end of the day, we’ll just end up with more of what we already have—and we already have too much of it.

“Could AI be trained to intentionally get it exactly wrong?”

14.

A few years ago I met a man in Berlin. We were both at a conference speculating about the future of literature. He was a university scientist working on building actual automatic writing programs, programs that could take sets of statistics and transform them into natural language. So he would take things like the stats of a football game and write a program that churned it into a report for the newspaper, so believably written that you couldn't tell that whole thing had been done by machine. It was pretty amazing. Then I spoke about my practice of uncreative writing, writing purposely mechanical and antihuman. He listened and was completely puzzled. Why would I want to do the opposite of what he was doing? Why in the world would I want to write more like a machine? As a scientist, he was trying to solve a problem. As an artist, I was trying to create a problem. And to him, that was just unbelievably weird. ✕

KENNETH GOLDSMITH is the author of dozens of essays and poetry books. He is also the author of performances and installations, was the founder of the famous free access archive of avant-garde poetry and media Ubuweb. He teaches at the University of Pennsylvania's English Department and is a senior editor of PennSound, where he hosted a weekly radio show at WFMU from 1995 until June 2010.

Goldsmith attended the Rhode Island School of Design for sculpture and worked as a visual artist for about ten years before taking up conceptual poetry.

On May 11, 2011, Goldsmith was featured at President and Mrs. Obama's celebration of American poetry at the White House. He read works by Walt Whitman and Hart Crane, as

well as from his work *Traffic*. In 2013 he was appointed the Museum of Modern Art's first Poet Laureate. In 2018, Goldsmith was honored by a symposium at the Onassis Cultural Center in Athens.

In 2019, After Donald Trump said, 'Where are her [Hillary Clinton] emails? Kenneth Goldsmith displayed all 60,000 pages of the emails that were sent on the 2016 presidential candidate's private server as part of his show "HILLARY: The Hillary Clinton Emails," staged in a Venetian movie theater-turned-grocery store.

Goldsmith was named the 2020 recipient of the Prix François Morellet for *Duchamp Is My Lawyer: The Polemics, Poetics, and Pragmatics of UbuWeb*.

He lives in New York.





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FLORENT DELVAL - OS KEYES

IN OPPOSITION TO UNIVERSALISM

While it is commonly understood that most of the devices of modern society, from tools to the urban fabric, from medicines to the work world, are designed by men for men, the consequences of this are largely underestimated.

This is demonstrated by the American journalist Caroline Criado Perez in her essay «Invisible Women». It is not easy to make the connection between the shape of a sports field, the architecture of a public toilet or the layout of a road and the physical and mental impact of these on women's bodies. How then not to fear the disastrous consequences of these mysterious algorithmic machines that we call AI: Artificial Intelligence? It is a fear now inscribed in the depths of the popular imagination. Fear is inherent in any technological change - let's deliberately use the word «change», rather than «progress». This fear is undoubtedly a defensive tool that allows us to take a critical distance. However, it must not be irrational. Certainly, oppressed and minorized populations are more significantly impacted by AI design biases, but we must define when, which measure and if fatality there is. First of all, if it is a question of demystifying AI, it goes without saying that the name is poorly chosen. Indeed, the term «intelligence» raises a suspicion: could a machine replace the human? According to Joannes Vandermeulen, interface designer and head of the Nahman studio in Brussels, a term such as «machine learning» would be more appropriate. Artificial intelligence is therefore already the basis for an ideology.

The French artist Grégory Chatonsky prefers the term «recursive neural networks» and recommends using AI only to designate the ideology that structures this discourse.

A magical object, locked from the inside for obviously commercial reasons, carrying ideology, AI is by nature problematic. But other narratives are possible to create a healthier relationship to this extension of our mental organization. Thus, Joannes Vandermeulen proposes not to try to dismantle at all costs the cogs that these black boxes contain: «There is a certain beauty in not knowing how AI works, as we do not necessarily know where our ideas may come from». It thus goes against what Gregory Chatonsky calls «the politics of explicability», «based on the fear that the AI decision-making system, based on data describing human activities in digital form, may reproduce human errors and prejudices». We have discussed these topics and fears concerning the biases inherent within AI with researcher Os Keyes.

Is AI the mysterious Black Box that non-specialists tend to imagine?

To me this is kind of...the wrong question? Which is a very philosophical answer, but bear with me: the problem is «AI is»; AI as a singular. Rather than treating AI as a singular thing - black-boxed or not - I instead see it as an infrastructure, an assemblage, a set of component parts (technical, cultural, and personal) that come together into that «black box». Wherever you see an AI, what you are really seeing is such an assemblage - there is data, and a model, but there are also the people who decided on and assembled the data, and decided the criteria on what data would count (and how). There are the people who decided where the model would be deployed, and what to do with the results. So asking if a model is black-boxed is sort of akin to asking if a corporation is. It is if you treat it as a monolith you are outside. But that monolith is ultimately people and processes, all the way down; different bits of it are visible to different people at different points.

We try approaching them as a singular object and such an approach invariably fails in the case that the traces of the model stretch beyond the code in front of us. I would argue that the first step to «opening» these black boxes is to take a more infrastructural, situated view.

What can we learn from the Microsoft 2016 chabot experiment? It was a milestone in the AI representation for a non specialist audience. Did it create an inaccurate perception of AI?

Honestly, I think it produced a highly accurate understanding of AI. That is: what we saw was a technology that was deeply flawed, very dependent for its veneer of correctness on a particularly narrow view of «correct». It was pushed out to a universal audience without much prior thought, and subsequently embarrassingly fell over. If the conclusion people drew was that «AI» is usually very simplistic and technologies don't work as intended when stretched beyond their initial use case and audience - that is the correct understanding.

Most technologies, in a broad sense, are thought as gender neutral, (medecine, language, cities...) even though they are

blatantly not neutral and are conceived by cis males for cis males. Would you say the world of AI is at the image of the rest of the society?

I would say that AI - as a configuration of technologies and people - is liable to incorporate the biases of those people, and technologies, in the same way everything else does. But I do not think that bias is itself inherently a problem, or that it is as cut and dry as a uniform /set/ of biases.

Everything has biases. Every time we design for X or optimise for X, we are designing and optimising away from Y. An algorithm for detecting cancer, for example, is biased 'away' from detecting tuberculosis. This is one of the requirements of its design. Biases are frequently, of course, much more serious, and much more systemic, and produce differential outcomes not for diseases in isolation but for people in reality. Biases around particular forms of embodiment, particular life courses. But the reason biases cause harm is frequently not because «bias is bad» but because we claim to design algorithms, and aim to deploy algorithms, in a universal way. We design something for cis men and then deploy it for «everyone», which goes about as well as designing an algorithm to detect cancer and then deploying it to detect chicken pox.

But what I'm trying to get at, here, is that the problem is in part that universalism. A diverse and vibrant ecosystem of algorithmic design and deployment in which people design algorithms for particular contextual niches is likely to contain a lot less violence. But normative western knowledge (ie, white, largely masculine western knowledge) valorises the universal. And so doing that is going to require a pretty fundamental change in how we assess and understand the purpose of design. We need to recognise, value and design for plurality before we can do anything substantive about bias. Otherwise we'll just be trying different forms of universalism.

"what we saw was a technology that was deeply, deeply flawed, very dependent for its veneer of correctness on a particularly narrow view of "correct"

As an example of this - one that gets at the issue of «is it a singu-

"It is not so much, again, about any particular designer, or perspective; it is about designers and perspectives that do not, or conceptually cannot, make room for the "other"

lar set of biases?» we can look at «Giggle», which billed itself as «an app for girls». Designer, Sall Grover, built-in a biometric system to do gender identification of uploaded images and detect who was «really» a woman. At the time, she presented the impact on trans women as accidental. These days, she's leant fully into transphobic «feminism». So: not a cis man, not designing for cis men, still produces a deeply violent and discriminatory system.

And the lesson here, I would argue, is that an universalist worldviews - whether they are men expressing toxic forms of masculinity, women expressing what Hannah McCann brilliantly describes as «toxic femininity» or «rigid femininity» - are a problem whatever their source, and a severe problem if they have structural power behind

them. It is not so much, again, about any particular designer, or perspective; it is about designers and perspectives that do not, or conceptually cannot, make room for the «other».

Could you give an example of how AI could reinforce inequality?

A thousand! But one example I can point to from right here in Washington State (in the United States, where I live) is around drivers' licenses. In the US, drivers licenses are incredibly important documents; they are essentially state identity cards. They are directly vital, since so much of the country lacks public transit and so depends on driving, but they are also indirectly vital because of how they serve as a requirement for everything from voting, to getting billing established for water service, or electricity. In Washington, new photographs provided to the DMV are analysed by facial recognition software. If a photograph is flagged, the production of that ID is stalled until the person who applied for it can satisfactorily convince the state they are who they say they are. Now; we know that facial recognition systems are particularly bad at distinguishing darker-skinned faces, and so much more likely to (falsely) accuse people of having duplicate entries in the drivers' license system. And we also know that having access to other forms of ID, or documentary proof

of who you are, is much harder for racial minorities. So we have a system determining, amongst other things, who can drive to work legally, who can get access to public utilities, who can vote - and that system is producing racially biased outcomes. I'd say disproportionately making it harder for racial minorities to hold jobs and vote is the definition of reinforcing inequality.

On your website, you ask the question: How do facial recognition systems encode and inscribe notions of race and gender? For that matter: what notions? What do you mean by « how »? Is it a technical issue? Wouldn't the question « why » more relevant?

So to me this comes back to this question of AI as a single monolith, or an assemblage of people and things. To me, seeing it as the latter, «how» is a really important question to answer - because answering it means tracking down in what ways, and at what points, these systems become racialized and gendered. And as a consequence, it means being able to point to particularly crucial sites to push on, and reform, and rework. Further, by looking at those sites, we sort of answer the «why». What racial categories should the data recognise? Who goes in which box? Who determines who goes in which box? What happens to «ambiguous» cases? By looking at that work, and answering those questions, we can see what is going «wrong». Further, we can often see the «why», too; we can look at what racial models they are using, what structural incentives they have to be classifying people in these ways in the first place, so on and so forth.

AI isn't based anymore on a symbolic (human) model, but on a machine only model. Wouldn't it be an opportunity to get free from most bias the further we go from a human model? Couldn't technology freed us from prejudices?

Unfortunately (and fortunately) you can never get away from the human being woven into the machinic. Two important components of this are worth highlighting.

First: however more machinic we get, there are always humans at the bottom. Even if an algorithmic system has no concept of what a human body «looks» like, or how a human «thinks», the data that goes into these systems is ultimately annotated, tabu-

lated, collected, structured by people. And what data we collect, how we collect it, who we collect it about - stepping back a bit, even what we are or are not treating as worthy of automating through AI - is a very fragile, messy and human set of decisions, one heavily dependent on existing incentives and existing biases. There is no getting free of the human.

I am personally pretty glad of this, because of the second component: our image of what getting free of the human is! Most often, when we talk about something being machine-like, valorise it as being stripped of human fallibility. We mean it doesn't have feelings. Something is machinelike if it is coldly rational, makes decisions based only on the data, is entirely ungrounded in the meanings that this data has, the messy circumstances and consequences of its decisions. What is «rational» and «objective» is already biased before we get to building an algorithm - we minimise and dismiss the value of feelings, emotions, experiences, /relationships/, anything that can't neatly be captured by metrics and quanta, and do so in a way that is highly masculinised. For something to be stripped of human foibles is impossible - these algorithms are programmed with, and so dependent on, the echoes of those foibles. But even if it were possible, I do not believe we would want an algorithm like that. Ultimately, algorithmic systems need to be grounded. An algorithm not knowing anything about the consequences of a decision it makes, or the

messy ambiguity of its data, might make for a cleaner design - but why would it make for a more just outcome?

Could trans or non binary people could take advantage of AI as it is currently conceived? Or should it be deconstructed and totally remade?

To me, the answer is yes: deconstruction, remaking. The reason for this is not simply the gender

biases built into many applications, but again: the messiness of humanity, the plurality of humanity. To be trans, to be non-binary, is not just to be contrary to what society assumes

"If algorithmic systems are going to continue to embody universal values and assumptions then - whether those universal assumptions and rules recognise trans existences in some form or not - I see them as a threat to us."

of one's approach to gender. It is also - at least, this is the utopian angle on it - to stand as evidence that universal claims, rules and principles are just /asking/ to be invalidated. If algorithmic systems are going to continue to embody universal values and assumptions then - whether those universal assumptions and rules recognise trans existences in some form or not - I see them as a threat to us. Because even if they recognise us as we currently are, they are opposed to change, and opposed to the unexpected. If we want to be in bodily configurations that are plural, or dynamic, or social configurations that are the same, we cannot abide unthinking universalism. No two trans people have the same experience of gender; no two non-binary people understand «non-binary» in the same way. If we want algorithms to allow for human growth and flourishing, rather than constrain and standardise our trajectories, we need a thousand messy, contradictory, plural algorithms, not one algorithm claiming to solve a problem forever. And that, to me, is not a way of approaching things that most algorithmic developers currently think about. And so if they can't conceive of plurality, let's replace them with people who can. ✖

OS KEYES is a public scholar and academic at the University of Washington, where they study gender, technology and power. They are an inaugural holder of the Ada Lovelace Fellowship. For more, see ironholds.org





Data is not human, Data is not perfect.

MAI ELSHEHALY

In my opinion, the problem with AI is fundamentally a data problem. Simply put, an AI system is a computer program that aims to emulate humans and surpass our ability to make decisions based on our knowledge and understanding of the world. Only computers don't see the world the way we see it. They see it through data.

Data is flawed by nature and one can attribute these flaws to three main sources:

1- Data is not human:

At a physical level, data constitutes a huge number of zeros and ones stored on a physical medium (e.g. a hard disk). What AI does is it creates different levels of abstraction to understand what these zeros and ones can tell us about the world. It groups them into bytes and words which then make numbers, text, images, videos, etc. The next level of abstraction is then to group these data types into information constructs, or so called “models”. Models comprise logic and inference rules that “teach” the AI system ways to make decisions on our behalf. These models are learned from existing data, and are trained to operate on new and unforeseen data to make decisions.

What often gets missed in this process is that data represents human stories. Stories of you and me, our families and friends and their families and friends. Our human stories have so much more to tell than what can be told by the zeros and ones, bytes and words, and multimedia that make this era of big data. This is why AI has failed us miserably time and again from predicting the outcomes of the [2016 presidential elections in the US](#) to [responding to the COVID-19 pandemic](#). Our reliance on AI alone, without paying enough attention to the dialogue between expert systems and expert humans, has been a less than optimal approach.

2- Data isn't perfect:

While AI models, and particularly machine learning techniques, strive for a perfect representation of the world through data, to inform their understanding, the actual underlying data is far from being perfect. We collect data through sensors that communicate over often unreliable networks. Other sources of data include error-prone data entry and web scraping bots. Therefore, data is often incomplete, sometimes inaccurate and unreliable. Data quality must be taken into account while designing and building AI models.

3- Data is biased:

Imagine being a famous athlete and [getting misclassified as a felon](#) by an AI system or being denied a software engineering position at Amazon [simply because you're a woman](#). These situations can happen due to biases in the data which are used to build AI models. It is critical for AI designers to acknowledge and identify these biases where they emerge and be able to amend the behaviour of the model by incorporating a more objective and balanced decision process.

The first problem in preventing bias is the obscurity that surrounds our understanding of the model and how it views the world. This brings us back to the idea of interpretability. The interpretability of an AI model plays a critical role in building trust in machine-made decisions. Model interpretability aims to offer an understanding of the model's internal processes, in order to allow humans to influence its behaviour and incorporate human expertise in this decision process. If we are able to *perceive* an AI model's biases, then we would be able to tweak model parameters in a way to address those biases. The problem is that most of these machine learning algorithms are black boxes and their internal processes are often too complicated for a human to perceive. Deep networks are made up of many layers and each layer can comprise hundreds of neurons. Understanding the connectivity between these neurons and how they cooperate to reach a deci-

sion can be a very tedious task. This is where visualisation and visual analytics are most helpful. They offer an insight into the internal mechanisms of the AI model and enable experts to correct the model and address issues like bias. Other ways to prevent bias include better sampling and cross validation, etc. However, I think the most important issue with bias is for us to understand what data we are feeding into an AI system. Exploratory analysis helps us build a cognitive model of what is captured in a dataset and build judgments of whether or not the data are truly representative of what we know about the world.

This in turn paves the way for higher aims like model accountability and compliance to GDPR [General Data Protection Regulation] requirements of transparent data handling and processing.

The Human-Centered Artificial Intelligence (HCAI) framework by Ben Shneiderman brilliantly captures the possible balance between automation/autonomy and the levels of human control over AI [1]. More research in this direction will yield more AI models that are “*reliable, safe and trustworthy*”.

Are bias related to the omission of unpredictable data? should we put more effort focusing on imperfection while training these AI?

I take your point about AI’s perfectionist approach as a source of bias. That may be a possibility if an AI tool eliminates anomalies or completely disregards them entirely. This may not be the case in all AI methods though[*] as some AI techniques are actually quite sensitive to anomalous data. Anomaly detection techniques are typically deployed prior to feeding data into an AI system and a decision is made about what to do with these anomalies. Human input is critical at this stage, as well as for assessing data quality. There is a very promising and interesting research stream in the VIS community which focuses on uncertainty visualisation. Jessica Hullman of Northwestern University is pioneering in this and I think much progress has been made in making data imperfections quite visible and understandable to experts as they design and build AI solutions.

So yes, absolutely we need a human-in-the-loop when designing and building AI models and we need this human to be informed of everything from data quality, to biases in the model and its outcomes. In 2019, we heard so much on the news about how the hype around AI being as intelligent as humans is nowhere close to being a reality. This is true of AI when operating autonomously. However, with the advent of better human-AI cooperation frameworks and as we continue to see more and more exciting visualisations that open the black box of AI, I’m quite positive that many of the challenges we discussed above will soon be a thing of the past.

You say: «Our reliance on AI alone, without paying enough attention to the dialogue between expert systems and expert humans, has been a less than optimal approach.»

Don’t you think that these teams of experts training bots aren’t expert enough and can’t provide the dialogue with an exhaustive human side? I mean, they can’t be perfectly trained in arts, politics, social studies etc... We depend on their partial knowledge and on their biased vision of these important fields of human knowledge, is it right to think that the bad constitution of the training teams is perhaps a serious cause of naivety and bias in AI?

The points you've raised make perfect sense. I guess it all depends on how we view AI and how we define the role it plays in this ongoing dialogue and collaboration with humans. It's important to remember that AI is a tool in the hands of creators rather than a creator in its own self. This means that when we talk about the human "experts", we don't necessarily mean AI experts. In fact, someone using an AI system to create art or poetry should not have to study how AI works. They should, however, have the right expertise in the subject matter in which the AI is being used. The same applies for medicine. We don't expect computer scientists to develop AI solutions and then use those solutions to diagnose illnesses. Instead, our role as systems designers and developers is to, first of all, understand the **tasks** that the AI system users aim to accomplish in the real world. This understanding of tasks is a tedious and iterative process that typically involves a lot of discussion with domain experts, in the form of interviews, observations and contextual enquiries. Once we build enough knowledge about those needs, we consider different design alternatives and iterate over a number of prototypes, while capturing feedback from our domain experts to ensure that the technology developed is fit for purpose. This cycle applies to any software development project regardless of whether an AI system is part of the solution or not. The main aim of this process is to develop software that is **usable** by human experts.

Now back to your excellent point about creative arts, I guess the overarching question is how do you define a domain expert, in this case an artist? Would someone who knows how to use or tweak an AI system to write poetry qualify as an artist? I'm not an art critic so I don't think I'm qualified to answer this question but my wild guess would be that the quality of the produced art would suffer from the lack of human domain expertise. I guess the bottom line here is to remember that we (humans) create AI solutions, as well as other technologies, to supplement our ability to perform real-world tasks. Will there be a point in time at which we're going to create completely autonomous AI solutions that require zero input from us and can completely replace us? I don't see this happening any time soon, and I honestly don't see the purpose of this pursuit. I'm a strong believer in the human-systems dialogue and the importance of immersive and interactive solutions that bring AI to a level of ubiquity that makes it easily accessible to human users in every domain. We want intelligent systems that enable humans to make better and more timely data-driven decisions, for example. We want intelligent solutions that enable artists to explore new art techniques, and doctors to explore new treatment alternatives. For this to happen, it's important to not lose sight of the fact that an AI **solution**, by definition, exists to **solve** a problem; and that every problem begins and ends with a human. ✖

[1] Shneiderman, Ben. «Human-centered artificial intelligence: Reliable, safe & trustworthy.» International Journal of Human-Computer Interaction 36.6 (2020): 495-504.

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**“There was once a big atomic bomb
That wanted to be a bullet.
His friends all asked why, when he was such
a big atomic bomb, he would want to be a tiny
bullet.
“I miss”, he sighed, “the personal touch.”**

Tuli Kupferberg



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Soundcloud Veilhan Venezia : <https://soundcloud.com/studioveneziarecordings>

Film Veilhan Venezia : <https://vimeo.com/346847978>

Instagram Veilhan Venezia : <https://www.instagram.com/explore/tags/studiovenezia/>

Twitter Veilhan Venezia : <https://twitter.com/search?q=%23studiovenezia>

Youtube Veilhan Venezia : https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=studio+venezia

URUBU'S CHRONICLES

LAURENT BOCHET - FRANÇOIS COMBIN

In the age of dematerialized and compressed music, the performative and immersive installation *Studio Venezia*, offered visitors to the 2017 Venice Biennale of Contemporary Art a physical experience characterized by an exceptional sound quality.

For seven months, French artist Xavier Veilhan unveiled the intimacy of musical creation by allowing the public to attend recording sessions by more than 250 international musicians.

Between sculpture and architecture, the formal qualities of *Studio Venezia*, have been coupled with technical and acoustic qualities that have contributed to the success of the project. The exhibition space became both artwork and stage where, on a daily basis and without any announced line-up, the guest musicians took to the stage for live recording sessions. The «control room», equipped with a mixing console lent by Nigel Godrich, Radiohead's long-time producer, as well as a collection of rare or historic instruments are made available to the musicians. As much architectural as it is musical, this work comes to life as soon as a single musical note is played, each time renewing the visitor's experience.

The perpetuation of a physical and ephemeral aesthetic experience

The Venice Biennale of Art runs over a period of seven months, more than ninety countries are represented, and nearly 500,000 people visit it. This is a likely

average of 2000 visitors per day who transited through the French pavilion, a colossal figure. Like a wave, this incessant flow forms a mass in perpetual motion.

This piece by Xavier Veilhan is remarkable in today's technological context, because even if the recording process was at the heart of it, it was not intended to be permanent. The artist produced a situation in which visitors were able to live a Total Art experience - both visual in this atypical space built by Veilhan, and musical in contact with the musicians and their impromptu creations. Although the artist did not adapt his creation for the market, he instead facilitated the multiplication of sound, photographs and videograms recordings. These same traces have gradually spread over the internet and social networks thanks to visitors, journalists and the musicians themselves. Today it is the fragmented body of this scattered corpus of «data» that bears witness to this installation. Like the music played there, the studio itself has now disappeared and this digital data provides its potentially endless echo; a multitude of reminiscences that the youtube algorithms will eventually associate with random echoes from the Internet. ✖

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VOICE OVER



BAD AI