

Critical Transhumanist Aesthetics? The Automatic Subject, *Actress* and *Young Paint*.

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ABSTRACT: When discussing the relations between Marxism and transhumanism it is first necessary to discuss the place of transhumanist discourse in capitalist society. Therefore, I will discuss the – controversial – notion of value as the ‘automatic subject of society.’ Marx can be read in a way that emphasizes the *always already transhumanist character of capitalism* – because in capitalism humans are not the subject of society, rather *value* in its movement of capital accumulation is the ‘automatic subject.’ Transhumanism is not opposed to capitalism, but one consequence of capitalism, although there might be opposing and emancipatory potentials in it. Such potentials could be discovered by art. In a second step I want to reconstruct the situation of the 1910s and 1920s and how ‘automation’ and related notions were discussed and criticized in a heterogeneous formation between Fordism, Russian Formalism, Surrealism and psychoanalysis, especially in relation to artistic strategies. This part is a short sketch of a very complex situation. Why this constellation? Because one of the central features of this discussion was – presumably because of the background of Fordism – to ascribe to art the potential to ‘deautomatize’ perception and cognition. In the final part I want to juxtapose the first two steps and focus on the example of black British musician *Actress* and his AI- *Double Young Paint*. Can we glimpse at least some idea of what a *critical transhumanist aesthetics* could be? Is it an aesthetics which uses the automatizing technologies of our current situation, but also disrupts and deautomatizes them?

KEYWORDS: Aesthetics, Artificial Intelligence, Automation, Media Art, Transhumanism

1. Introduction: Transhumanist Aesthetics?

In his groundbreaking paper on the philosophical relations between transhumanism and Marxism, Steinhoff makes an interesting observation: “Transhumanists ... desire to use such new and emerging technologies as genetics, robotics, artificial intelligence, and nanotechnology to achieve ambitious goals.” One of these goals is to enhance “intellectual, physical, aesthetic and ethical capabilities” (Steinhoff 2014, 2). I want to emphasize especially the augmentation of *aesthetic capabilities*. There are several movies and tv-series in which we can see

fictional enhanced transhumans – but producing an advanced art or showing enhanced capabilities for understanding art is, as far as I can see, never thematized. How could aesthetic capabilities be enhanced? We could imagine artificial eyes that see more – but the art we historically have is made for our normal eyes, so supposedly nothing new could be seen. There might be (stories of) enhanced people being able to tell forgeries from originals by looking with their enhanced eyes and therefore be able to produce better forgeries. There might be people

which have enhanced capabilities and therefore can produce artworks for people like themselves, which exhibit more subtle formal structures that can only be perceived with an enhanced sensorium. We'll see. But there is a more recent topic I want to focus on.

Steinhoff mentions 'artificial intelligence' (AI), a form of 'new and emerging technologies' that has been discussed a lot recently. Could the cooperation between humans and AI bring about new aesthetic forms? Well, perhaps – Miller (2019) has written an impressive study on this issue. But is that transhumanist? Was art not always about artists working with – and against – different materials? Is AI not just another brush? Yes maybe, but perhaps it's not. See the case of *Actress* aka Darren J. Cunningham – a highly interesting DJ doing experimental electronic music:

Young Paint (aka Jade Soulform aka Francis aka Generation 4 aka AZD) is a Learning Program that has been progressively emulating the Greyscale to Silvertone process Darren J Cunningham started in 2008,' read the introduction to an eponymously named mini-LP. The sixsong release was co-written in a collaboration between Cunningham and an Artificial Intelligence capable of generating electronic compositions. (Pemberton 2019)

And the website of the *Transmediale*-festival says:

Young Paint has been progressively learning and emulating the shadowy, unpredictable, UK bass- and rave-inspired music of Darren J. Cunningham, aka Actress. Over the course of 2018, the AI-based character has spent time programming and arranging Cunningham's sonic palette, learning not only how to react to his work, but also to take the lead with the occasional solo. A life-size projection of Young Paint working in a virtual studio parallels Cunningham's performance on stage, visualising their collaboration.¹

Obviously *Young Paint* is not conceived only as a tool, but also as a partner, automatizing and at the same time transforming the style of *Actress*. It's an assemblage of a human musician and a learning neural



Figure 1. Darren J. Cunningham (Actress), left, and on the right "Young Paint" his AI-Double. (Sónar Barcelona 2019)



Figure 2. "Young Paint" his AI-Double, together performing live. (Transmediale 2019)

network. Perhaps this approach could be understood as a kind of transhumanist aesthetics.

But to better understand this example and transhumanist aesthetics in general, it is necessary to discuss the place of transhumanist discourse in capitalist society, the possible role of art (or at least some forms of art) in reflecting on or working with transhumanist discourse.

In Part 2 I will discuss the (controversial) notion of value as the 'automatic subject of society' (cf. Schröter 2011). Marx can be read in a way that emphasizes the *always already transhumanist character of capitalism* – because in capitalism humans are not the subject of society; rather *value* in its movement of capital accumulation is the 'automatic subject.' The "roaming automaticity of Capital" (Badiou 1999, 57) gives rise to transhumanist discourse (see Steinhoff 2014 for more details on transhumanism). How are humans embedded there? What does this mean in

¹ See <https://transmediale.de/content/actress-young-paint-live-2-Feb>. The question, how this learning network exactly operates, is ignored here.

regard to the role and development of technology? Transhumanism is not opposed to capitalism, but one consequence of capitalism, although there might be opposing and emancipatory potentials in it. Such potentials could be discovered by art. Therefore, it could be interesting theoretically and politically to find forms of art which deal implicitly or explicitly and perhaps even critically with automaticity, automatism and automation.

In Part 3 I want to reconstruct the situation of the 1910s and 1920s and how 'automation' and related notions were discussed and criticized in a heterogeneous formation between Fordism, Russian Formalism, Surrealism and psychoanalysis, especially in relation to artistic strategies. This part is a short sketch of a very complex situation. Why this constellation? Because one of the central features of this discussion was – presumably because of the background of Fordism – to ascribe to art the potential to 'deautomatize' perception and cognition.

In the conclusion I want to juxtapose Parts 2 and 3, and come back to the introduction, to *Actress/Young Paint* and some other material. Can we glimpse at least some idea of what a *critical transhumanist aesthetics* could be? Is it an aesthetics which uses the automatizing technologies of our current situation, but also disrupts and deautomatizes them? As the analysis suggests, Marxists should look to art because artists detect changes in the techno-environment of capital at an early stage and therefore allow us to think through the status of the human and its enhancement.

2. Transhumanism and the Automatic Subject

Marx's *Capital* does not begin with 'capitalists' as a group of people. It does not begin with people at all (except for mentioning 'society'). It begins with the *commodity* – which Marx explicitly designates the "elementary form" of wealth in "societies in which the capitalist mode of production prevails" (Marx 1976, 125). Why the elementary form, from which Marx derives all higher forms like capital etc.? Because it has two aspects: a sensuous one (use-value) and an abstract one (exchange-value). A commodity is an object (or service) with a specific, concrete, irreducible use; however, at the same time, it is also

completely unspecific and abstract. This is because it is exchanged, and in order to exchange two different commodities, all concrete and different properties must be ignored in the process of exchange. The only respect in which the two commodities are identical is their exchange-value. Exchange-value makes its appearance in social exchange. It is abstract – and as Marx attempts to show in detail, this abstraction results in the formation of a special, separate commodity: money. A society based on exchange is only possible with money as the objectification of abstract value (cf. Heinrich 2011, 196–251).

The division between concrete and abstract, and the conflict that arises between these two poles, forms the core of capitalism and can be seen as the basic reason for capitalist crises, such as climate change.² Marx argues that abstract value tends to grow infinitely. Different commodities have qualitatively different use-values, but different sums of money can only differ quantitatively. This can only make sense if, following the cycle money-commodity-money (M-C-M), the result is *more* money. Once the relation of capital has been established, more value in the form of money (M*) must be created from value through the intermediary step of commodity production and surplus value through class relations: M-C-M*.³ And since value is purely quantitative, this movement is in principle endless (why only 10,000 units of surplus value rather than 100,000, why not 1,000,000 or more?). "The circulation of money as capital is, on the contrary, an end in itself, for the expansion of value takes place only within this constantly renewed movement. The movement of capital is endless" (Marx 1976, 253). Capital is not the sum of all capitalists or the sum of all wealth (hoarding), *capital is the movement of making more value out of value*. Marx thus shows that the "competition of capital ... is only the external form ... in which capital's inner drive to accumulation is realised" (Deutschmann 2008, 132).

The class division developed historically in order to allow the production of more value: "Commodities cannot themselves go to market and perform exchanges in their own right" (Marx 1976, 178). The

² This is why Christian Lotz can argue that capitalism forms a 'culture of abstraction,' cf. Lotz (2014a).

³ This formula is so central that an entire book about capitalism could be named after it. Cf. Fülberth (2005).

enrichment of capitalists is just a side effect of the movement of the increase in value, not its purpose. Hence, “owners of capital and, likewise, the managers, prove to be mere functionaries of the ‘automatic subject,’ which operates beyond their aims” (Kurz 1999). Capitalists and workers alike are “personifications of economic relations” (Marx 1976, 179). It is not a psychological attribute, such as the ‘greed’ of people who happen to be capitalists, which drives the whole affair: in a society directed at constantly increasing value, every individual has to act exactly the way they do simply in order to survive. Hence, the goal of production is also not to satisfy concrete needs of whatever kind, even if this can happen mostly by coincidence in certain historical constellations. Capitalist society is a kind of cybernetic system⁴ whose sole purpose is to make more value out of value, more money out of money – no matter the consequences this system has for people and planet, or even for itself. Money as an expression of value is an “end-in-itself” (Kurz 2012).⁵ The purely quantitative abstraction governs all concrete objects and processes and seeks to constantly expand itself further – but this expansion encounters resistances. There are objects and processes that cannot be subsumed seamlessly or without rest into the logic of value. Roswitha Scholz (2011) gives the examples of “love,” the economy of feeling, (child) care, etc. Marx describes the endless self-movement of value in this manner:

It is constantly changing from one form into the other, without becoming lost in this movement; it thus becomes transformed into an automatic subject. If we pin down the specific forms of appearance assumed in turn by self-valorizing value in the course of its life, we reach the following elucidation: capital is money, capital is commodities. In truth, however, value is here the subject* [*footnote: i.e. the independently acting

4 Cf. Kurz 2002: “It was only through this new economic logic that a total market economy could come into being in which profit-focused companies compete with each other and all people are reliant on ‘earning money.’ Money is now related to itself in a cybernetic cycle. In its absurd self-movement, it renders itself as an end-in-itself independent of all human subjects and begins its own spectral life.”

5 Cf. also Kurz 1999: “But if ‘labor’ is the substance of value, and thus the substance of money, one therefore has to describe labor too as an end-in-itself: it is the self-referring and permanent alienated expenditure (*Entäußerung*) of human energy.”

agent] of a process in which, while constantly assuming the form in turn of money and commodities, it changes its own magnitude, throws off surplus-value from itself considered as original value, and thus valorizes itself independently. (Marx 1976, 255)⁶

Can the automatic subject be linked to the concept of the fetish? In connection with financial capital, Marx himself also talks of the “automatic fetish” (Marx 1981, 516).⁷ In my reading of Marx I want to emphasize the objective character of the fetish. The fetish⁸ is not something psychological like a brand cult, compulsive consumption⁹ or an *idée fixe*. It is also not a mere “ideology” according to which people simply *believe* that value as money ‘rules the world.’¹⁰ “The theory of ‘objective fetishism’ assumes, by contrast, that as long as value, commodities and money exist, society will *actually* be ruled by the self-movement of the things it has created.” (Jappe 2005, 84, emphasis in original). We all know this unconsciously¹¹ – when we say ‘money rules the world’ or ‘money makes the world go round’ or when we speak of apparently immutable ‘market laws.’ It is “a social relation of things” (Marx 1904, 30) that fundamentally constitutes capitalist society.

In line with this reading of Marx one could say that capitalism is always already ‘transhumanist.’ Its central operation is the self-referential ‘autopoiesis,’ which one could formulate with a notion from post-

6 The concept of the ‘automatic subject’ is controversial. Jürgen Behre and Nadja Rakowitz (2001) argue that Marx didn’t use the term to describe the structure of capitalism but to designate an ideological mystification (‘self-moving value’) that makes class struggle invisible. Their position has been criticized by Michael Sommer and Dieter Wolf (2008, 48–85), who argue for the ‘automatic subject’ to be taken seriously as a valid description of the cybernetic structure of capitalism.

7 Cf. Kurz (2004, 187) on the equivalence between the ‘automatic subject’ and ‘the fetish.’ ‘Automatic subject’ and ‘the fetish’ should be related more clearly to the ‘cybernetic,’ mentioned here several times. All notions seem to imply a kind of self-containing, circular structure. I cannot go into these details here.

8 On the theory and history of the concept of the fetish, cf. Pietz (1985; 1987; 1988). Cf. Iacono (1992).

9 As Böhme (2014, 223–295) occasionally suggests.

10 On the fetish and ideology, cf. Rose (1977) and Dimoulis and Milios (1999).

11 Kurz (2004, 165–180) describes how an awareness of the automatic and mechanical character of domination, transcending any subjective purposes of any rulers, gradually appeared: from bureaucratisation theories (Weber) and structural Marxism (Althusser) through to Foucault and systems theory (Parsons and Luhmann).

humanist Luhmannian systems theory (Luhmann 2012, 32–34). In systems theory people are only the environment of the social system(s) – and in Marxian theory, as read here, people are only the environment of the automatic subject. Or to formulate it ironically with McLuhan: People are the “sex organs”¹² of value.

But is ‘transhumanism’ really the appropriate term here? If we understand ‘transhumanism’ as the technological improvement of human bodies and minds and its accompanying ideological frameworks, the notion doesn’t seem to fit. The discourse on the automatic subject seems more about the non-humanist or non-anthropomorphic character of capital. But nevertheless: The reading of Marx presented here emphasizes that there is always already a machine-like, cybernetic structure at the heart of capitalist society. One must relate this to the accelerated evolution of technology in capitalism in the sense that the automatic subject tends to literally become a system of automatic machinery. This is an argument Christian Lotz makes explicit:

All elements of the work process eventually become interdependent and merge into one system until today’s logistics, computer systems and abstract operating models transform this system into a mathematically calculable operation and thus further ‘optimize’ it. This refers not only to factories, but to the entire capitalist production, i.e. to the reproduction process of society as a whole. Everything becomes a huge machine, so to speak. The workers eventually become organs of the automatic system itself. They do not simply use the machine, but become part of the machine itself. ... The machine is *capital materialized*. ... This symbiosis of machine/knowledge and capital as the *existing capital* then also helps to solve another famous riddle, namely Marx’ speech of the ‘automatic subject’ in *Capital*. ... In philosophical terminology, ‘subject’ refers to something that can *relate to itself*. ‘Automatic subject’ must therefore be determined in two ways: On the one hand, it is a self-reference (utilization: money becomes *more* money); on the

other hand, however, this self-reference must exist in reality. The system of machinery – the *automaton* – is therefore the *form of existence* of this self-reference. (Lotz 2014b, 22–24. Emphasis in original).

Therefore, it can be argued that in capitalism people are always already embedded in a system of technological connections to optimize them, make them more effective and productive. There is – at least in capitalism – no pure human which is *then* ‘transhumanized.’¹³ That a discourse on transhumanism emerged is therefore not surprising at all – it is the logical consequence of a society structured around the automatic subject that becomes real as the permanently accelerating sociotechnical assemblage in which humans are only parts and organs.¹⁴ And it is also not surprising that the culture industries of late capitalism are saturated with images of machinery ruling the world and artificial intelligences destroying mankind. Just think of the *Terminator* movies. With the accelerating development of ever smarter technologies, finally, a capitalism without people seems to be possible (see Kjösen 2018). Given this configuration, the question emerges if and how there can be a kind of resistance to the automatic subject. Of course, one could think about the complete dismantling of capitalism, but that revolutionary perspective is not the topic of this paper. I want to underline that in parts of avantgarde art of the twentieth century the topic of capitalism’s ‘automatism’ seems to have been registered at least indirectly (see Part 3). Given these discussions: How can we understand aesthetic strategies like *Actress/Young Paint* (and others)? Are there possibilities for a critical transhumanist aesthetics? (See Conclusion).

13 This fits with the anthropological argument (made by Gehlen and others) that humans cannot exist without technology in the first place, that humans are technological from the very beginning and that this technicity is what separates humans from animals. If this is the case, is there any special role for technology and automaticity in capitalism? I would argue that of course humans are always already technological. But the social formation called Capitalism produces a specific realization of this primordial technicity: Technologies, machines are materializations of the “automatic subject” and are basically put to use only to enhance and accelerate accumulation, even if this destroys the ecological and social possibilities of humans. In this sense technology is “transhumanist” – it has structurally to transgress all human boundaries if that is necessary for capital accumulation.

14 Cf. also Hesse (2016) on the relation of capital to technology.

12 McLuhan (1994, 46): “Man becomes, as it were, the sex organs of the machine world.” McLuhan doesn’t relate this to value, but to the machine – which can be read as the materialization of capital. I’ll return to that in a moment.

3. Automatization, Deautomatization and Automatism in Art at the Beginning of the 20th Century

At the beginning of the twentieth century there were several parallel and seemingly unconnected developments which center around notions that are not identical, but at least similar and all are connected to ‘automation’ in a wider sense. Firstly, there was the notion of ‘automatization’ (emerging out of a discourse of rationalization) in industry, culminating in Ford’s assembly line in 1913, an important part of the machine system (mentioned by Marx) in which workers become parts of the machine (via psycho-body-technologies like Taylorism). This conditioning of workers was disturbingly pictured in Charlie Chaplin’s great film *Modern Times* (1936). Secondly, the Fordist and Taylorist conditioning of workers is obviously related to another field, namely the development of the notions of psychic and bodily automatisms, that took place in psychology and psychoanalysis in the late nineteenth century. The idea was basically that human mental processes are structured (at least to a certain degree) by repetitive and unconscious operations.¹⁵ Interestingly enough, some (not all) artist movements and some art theorists drew conclusions from the increasing role that ‘automatism’ and ‘automation’ played in the early twentieth century. I will just mention two important examples:

A. Russian Formalism and especially Viktor Shklovsky, argued that the task of art is to ‘defamiliarize’ perception, to ‘make it strange.’ Shklovsky saw quotidian perception marked by automatization. “Automatization eats things, clothes, furniture, your wife, and the fear of war” (Shklovsky 2015, 162).¹⁶ He did not explicitly refer to industrial automation – but his famous essay ‘Art as Device’ appeared in 1917, four years after Ford installed an assembly line for the production of cars. Nevertheless, Shklovsky sometimes refers to the car as a paradigmatic example. Ginzburg writes, quoting Shklovsky: “We know how life is made and how Don Quixote and the car are

made too.’ Literary criticism as a scientific enterprise, art as a technological artifact.” (Ginzburg 1996, 8). In another passage Shklovsky mentions explicitly the “automatic age” (quoted in Platnov 2016, 19) and he’s quoted saying: “The machine changes man more than anything else” (quoted in Lvoff 2016, 65).¹⁷ His argument should have been quite clear to his contemporaries, living in a world full of automatized, mechanical, industrial forms of movement and perception.¹⁸ Art, on the other hand, should present things (or processes) anew – so that we as beholders could see them, in a way, as for the first time. Art was not supposed to change the political implications of industrial automation or the conditions at workplaces,¹⁹ but at least it could change and refresh a petrified perception. Automatization and perceptual automatism were to be estranged by art to get a fresh look onto the world. In that sense, art had political implications:

[Before] it became endangered, democracy was felt by Shklovsky to be an organized system of indifference based on equality through automatization and rationality. Thus Shklovsky sought in Futurism an antidote not just to the automatism of bourgeois democracy but also to the fixity of symbolic capital and power that the Revolution was after (and he was unhappy when Futurism proved incapable of providing the latter remedy). (Tihanov 2005, 681)

B. Automatisms also played a role in a very different artistic field that took place at roughly the same time as Russian Formalism, namely Surrealism. Surrealism developed (amongst others) so called strategies of

17 Lvoff goes on, in relation to Russian Formalism: “The assembly line society privileged its new institutions over the old ones, and the patron of the arts changed: no longer a single connoisseur expecting art to edify and treat him to its subtleties but the faceless masses of workers with their urging necessity for respite from hard, dehumanizing work” (2016, 66).

18 See also Benjamin, who discussed in the 1930s, as is well known, the changes that technological forms of reproduction forced upon perception, cf. Benjamin (2008).

19 Though, Steiner (2014, 199) writes: “Viktor Šklovskij, for example, arguing against Spencer’s conception of rhythm as an energy-saving mechanism, had already pointed out the difference between prosaic and poetic rhythm – between the regular rhythm of a work song, which by automatizing movements tends to save labor, and the violation of this rhythm in art for the sake of de-familiarized, difficult perception.” Here some working conditions, the ‘work song’, enter Shklovskys discourse.

15 Cf. Dolar and Marek (2010).

16 Cf. on the background of Russian Formalism Erlich (1980).

automatic writing and drawing. For example, Breton wrote a nowadays famous paper on ‘the automatic message.’²⁰ The surrealists sought to transcend quotidian, rational consciousness by these techniques; the idea was to release unconscious impulses and energies. Surrealism’s discourse on automatic strategies in art were very different from Shklovsky’s approach. While Shklovsky expected art to overcome automatization, Surrealism used ‘automatic strategies’ – however, the surrealists did not understand ‘automatization’ as a set of mechanized, formulaic forms (as did Shklovsky) but on the contrary as that which, by its spontaneity, disrupted rational consciousness. But the goals were comparable – to transcend conventional, quotidian consciousness, to open up new possibilities of perception and presumably action.²¹

Very different aesthetic approaches felt the need to relate to ‘automatization’ or ‘automatism’ at the beginning of the twentieth century. I suspect that this can only be explained by the dominance of automated production and technological reproduction of media formats at the beginning of the twentieth century.²² Of course, one may ask, if any of these approaches in a way came close to the reality of industrial automation and its economic, social, psychological and cultural impacts. Certainly, it was not artists who improved working conditions, but the workers’ movement. But the least we can say is that some forms of artistic work and some theoretical reflections on the arts did not ignore the new conditions of work and production.²³ Modern art was seldom, if ever, ‘autonomous’ *l’art pour l’art*, but engaged in different ways with political and economic realities.²⁴

20 Cf. Breton (2007). See also: Bauduin (2015).

21 It is therefore no coincidence that some Surrealists (like Breton or Éluard) were at some historical point close to the Communist Party.

22 The role of the ‘automatic condition’ can also be seen in the already mentioned text of Benjamin on mechanical reproduction. Cf. also Krauss (1981) on the relation of photography to Surrealism.

23 The story is of course longer and more complex: There are Warhol’s and Judd’s very different strategies of emulating and estranging methods and aesthetics of industrial production (cf. Egenhofer 2008), but also the experiments of ‘information aesthetics’ (cf. Schröter 2019) and many more.

24 Cf. on the vexed relation between form and the historical place of art, amongst others, Buchloh (2015) and Jameson (2007, ix–xxi).



Figure 3. Cover of *Actress'* AZD.

4. Conclusion: Critical Transhumanist Aesthetics?

Given the arguments made in Part 2 that capitalism is always already ‘transhumanizing’ everyone by inserting everybody into the technological assemblages of the automatic subject with the goal of acceleration and valorization, and given the sketch in Part 3 that strategies to cope with the automaticity of capitalist modernity are an important part of the history of modern art, we can finally ask how the situation is today. Is there an analogue to the constellation in which Ford invented the assembly line and only a few years later Shklovsky demanded of art to deautomatize perception?

One of the most discussed technologies today is AI – mentioned by Steinhoff (2014) as one of the emerging technologies relevant for transhumanist discourse. To cut a long story short, the technologies today grouped under the name of AI are technologies of machine learning; that is, in essence, pattern recognition. These neural nets and similar approaches have to be fed with lots of data to learn to recognize certain patterns and are heavily researched because they can find patterns in big data, for example in science (see e.g. Bourilkov 2019). Machine learning is also very central for big infotech-industry companies like Google or

Facebook, who on the one hand have the data to train machine learning, and on the other hand need it to make sense (and profitability) of their masses of data (see Dyer-Witheford, Kjosen and Steinhoff 2019, ch. 1 on the AI-industry). It is one of the most important capitalist technologies, central for profit in the data-world – and everybody is inserted in this new technological assemblage for accelerating valorization. In that sense, machine learning is the assembly line of our times. Our private lives, and even our unconscious, are analyzed, for example, by tracing our profiles on ‘social media’²⁵ to make us more profitable – be it as workers or as consumers.

This is a first hint at how we can read *Actress/Young Paint* as a form of critical transhumanist aesthetics. The unconscious is already colonized by capital and inserted into the machineries of the automatic subject. Its automatisms can no longer be the site of resistance, as was the case in Surrealism. Cunningham mirrors himself in a machine learning system that on the one hand learns and mimics his aesthetic strategies, but on the other hand produces unforeseeable digressions. This is a kind of ‘surrealism without the unconscious’ (Jameson 1991, 67), but in a new and critical way. Cunningham forms with his double a new kind of transhumanist assemblage – *Actress/Young Paint* – which enhances his aesthetic self-reflection, because he can see what the system deems to be characteristic for his style and he can react to that. But this is not just happening in a studio – it is made explicit and the dialogue is performed live. In a sequence that can be found on YouTube,²⁶ we can see Cunningham on Stage and *Young Paint* – in a video – working in his virtual studio. Cunningham splits into two. This was already implicit in the cover of *Actress*’ album AZD.

In a *détournement* of Lacan’s mirror stage, the artist is split into ‘himself’ and a virtual double that mimics and transcends him, thereby laying bare the permanent virtual doubling of consumers in form of their virtual profile. By this, the artwork lays bare the constructed character of all transhumanist assemblages.

Moreover, the visual design of *Young Paint* cites the metallic appearance of famous icons of transhumanist cinema, namely the T-1000 from *Terminator 2* (USA 1991, James Cameron), which also contrasts with Cunningham being a person of colour. Questions of the historical emergence of capitalism – colonialism, therefore the ironic British flag on the hat of *Young Paint* (at least in some images) – are juxtaposed with ideologies of the seemingly race- and genderless world of high technology. The name *Young Paint* evokes painting and therefore (parts of) the history of (modern) art, pointing to the difficult relation of self-referential form and political and historical reference in artworks (see Buchloh 2015), as much as to the ever accelerating ‘newness’ (‘young’) in avant-garde aesthetics. Painting is the artform most closely connected to the myth of the creative, male, white genius – it is therefore an ironic move to evoke painting in an artwork that is centered around at least a partial giving up of control to automatic – ‘unconscious’ – machines.

This aesthetic strategy can be heard in the music on the *Young Paint* EP. It is at the same time a repetition of basic blocks of electronic dancefloor music, but also weirdly deautomatized, directing the listeners to their petrified expectations. Rhythmic structures are confronted with sudden irregular eruptions, but also get stuck in hyper-machinic endless repetition. The monotonous repetition of the automatic subject and crisis-as-irregularity are part of the formal design.²⁷ The sound of many tracks of *Actress* quotes analog procedures, such as badly adjusted analog noise reduction systems in a track like “Don’t” from *Actress*’ album *Ghettoville*²⁸ (which is also a typical example of the extreme repetition which is one pole of the musical repertoire of *Actress*). The archaeology of sound technology is present in the sound design and so the historical place of the digital music technology is reflexively exhibited. The permanent technological development, so typical for capitalist accumulation and acceleration, is alluded to.

27 Cf. Bockelmann (2004) who actually argues in his study on the ‘beat of money’ that the empty form of value is basically the reason for the emergence of beat in European music.

28 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4bxjY-0ut5Y>, Accessed October 16, 2020.

25 And that’s why they are rightly called ‘social media’ – these systems are the media of the social, transforming the social into analyzable data sets.

26 See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZsZc4Q_eDk4. Accessed October 16, 2020.

Cunningham and *Young Paint* are co-workers in a dialogical process of creation, but further questions are implied: What if the neural net gets so good in simulating *Actress* that it can do *Actress* albums all by itself? Can one day *Young Paint* substitute *Actress* and doesn't this allude to the nervous contemporary discussions on the potential disappearance of labour? Don't their fascinating and disturbing common live performances pose the questions of the collaboration between man and machine in transhumanist assemblages?

Be that as it may: Artforms reflecting on and/or working with AI and other 'emerging technologies' and that comment on our always already transhumanist situation will appear in the future. This essay was only a preliminary sketch of how to address such phenomena.

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