General

Silent Works: The Hidden Labor of AI□ Capitalism

Turning the Apparent Self-Organising Magic of Market-Oriented Computational Projects Inside Out

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Just when it seemed like we were waking up from the wildest accelerationist dreams of full automation, frictionless consumption and entirely mediated posthuman existences, the pandemic sent us scrambling back to them. Industry analysts predict that technological transformations of work that were to unfold in the next twenty years – warehouse robotics, telecommuting, the platformization of services – will now occur in the next five. So rapid is this restructuring of capitalism that it becomes challenging to theorize, and organizing a coherent political challenge to it difficult to even envision. Yet the artists assembled into the exhibition *Silent Works* attempted to do both during a winter school last November hosted by the *Berliner Gazette*, a hybrid art-media-publishing outfit that has been at the forefront of critical digital culture since the dotcom era.



Silent Works is not just a project that is critical of what the organizers label 'AI-capitalism'. In puncturing the fantasies of seamless machinic processes with the perpetual reminder that 'automated' systems are held together by the cogs of human labourers, it attempts to go a step further into imagining what kinds of rebellions might take place and what alternatives to capitalism might emerge from such resistance. In this, it is political in a more straightforward way: it identifies subjects of antagonism to digital capitalism (at least in potentia) in the human figures embedded in its systems of control and value creation, and it investigates the possibilities for radical challenges from these subjects. It is also a rather massive endeavour, encompassing dozens of artists and collaborators from around the world into a panoply of websites, manifestos, Vimeo and Soundcloud links, and the odd infodump. I cannot hope to address each piece – indeed, I can't shake the suspicion I've completely missed some of them. Such are the vicissitudes of the infinite choices of The Online: eternal FOMO.

Many of the exhibition pieces are highly conceptual, resting on reams of the latest critical research into algorithmic management, outsourced clickwork, tech-driven gentrification and other morbid symptoms of our cyberpunk present. Interviews with activists, researchers and theorists of these phenomena from the *Silent Works* exhibition's companion booklet *Invisible Hand(s)*, an astonishingly valuable compendium rendered more vital by the centrality of the pandemic to its exploration of the contours of the digital economy – the interviews were conducted as Europe and much of the rest of the world went into lockdown. *Berliner Gazette* editors Magdalena Taube and Krystian Woznicki seem to have immediately grasped the significance of Covid-19 to the already existing trajectories of capitalism's technological restructuring, or in their words 'the pandemic-related crisis as a crisis of AI-capitalism'. The steady accumulation of Amazon boxes and Deliveroo bags in the dumpsters outside my window, where I sit during the Netherlands' second lockdown, speaks to its continued relevance, one that transcends the particular artworks themselves. I plan to share it, and return to it myself.

Comparatively, the formal qualities and methods featured in *Silent Works* are straightforward and well tested. Following firmly in the tradition of tactical media, Berlin-based collective Peng! orchestrates a Yes-Men-style prank phone call between the head of German food delivery app Lieferando and one of its cyclists. Believing he is conversing

with a sympathetic state bureaucrat, the CEO reveals his plans to subvert local works councils, and casually remarks upon the perverse business models endemic to today's platforms. 'Drivers are pure marketing', he states, as he explains that the company loses money on each transaction.

Projects from Oddviz and Benjamin Heisenberg each rely on procedurally generated approaches to urban space. Oddviz's 'Kreuzberg Shedding', in a continuation of the ongoing critical reassessment of street art's role in Berlin's gentrification, algorithmically rips away the graffiti-saturated facades to reveal a generic grey computer-generated model underneath. While they claim the approach 'mimics the work of machine learning algorithms that crawl, scan, order and reorganize', and which require massive amounts of human labour to 'train'. there is a tactility to these gestures. They resemble the peeling away a glob of drying paint, reconstituting (perhaps ironically) the physicality of material on an immaterial plane. Heisenberg's algorithmic deconstruction of the burning gas station scene from Alfred Hitchcock's ***The Birds*** spreads repetitive chunks of flames across a shot of Bodega Bay, resembling a glitched out SimCity disaster.

Several projects work within science fiction, the genre, as Fredric Jameson pointed out long ago, chiefly responsible for preserving the utopian impulse in late capitalism. All confront the motor of universal history in our moment: Amazon. If Amazon's strength resides within its sophisticated algorithms that impose unity on its sprawling subcontracted logistics networks and globally dispersed micro-tasked labour power, University of Phoenix transforms this power into its Achilles heel, envisioning code fragments planted by MTurk workers to be reassembled by the company's proprietary AI into a destructive curse: high-tech sabotage meets neo-pagan mysticism. In ***What If Invisibilized Workers Reclaimed the Future?*** former Amazon workers living in 2040 recount their moments of refusal which would build into a movement that restructured the corporation into a massive distributed international commune: Commazon.

Other fictional works are grounded in more relational approaches. Gabriela Ceja and Fran Ilich's *Diego De La Vega Coffee Co-Op* has constructed a lo-fi mockumentary about an imagined food distribution company Awesome, modelled closely on Amazon with a few splashes of other platform giants like Instacart and UberEats. Focused on the experiences of logistics workers drawn from New York City's desperate immigrant populations, the film intersperses scripted interviews with footage of actual labor protests. Recalling the successful effort to block Amazon from opening up its H2 headquarters in New York, Awesome has withdrawn from the city, relocating to an artificial island just outside. Yet workers, rather than celebrate, lament the increased length to their commute. Amidst the Covid-19 crisis, Awesome seems like the only game in town. Even in this fictional world, resistance is vanishingly rare.

While *Diego De La Vega Coffee Co-Op* stages an imagined encounter between workers and artists, the collective Into the Black Box strives to achieve it in reality. Their investigation and documentation of Amazon's logistics networks in Northern Italy, and the workers within them, is far more autonomist Marxism than relational aesthetics: practices of workers' inquiry and co-research designed to investigate the composition of the Amazon workforce, which, like the company's proprietary algorithms, is kept obscure. The project here is only a beginning – photographs of facilities, the journey of a single delivery driver – but compellingly points towards such 'visual cartographies' as significant tools for Amazon's grassroots opponents.

In AI-capitalism, it is not only the labour of the digital economy that is obscured. It is the technical apparatus itself, as software and platforms surge past their status as novel startups and assume the mantle of critical infrastructure. Art can make these structures visible not only through representation, but through disruption. As the Russian/Belarusian

project eeefff states on its description, 'when it stops working, it becomes visible'. Their piece jarringly superimposes the webcams of microtask workers onto the clean and professional interfaces of corporate websites, documenting the awkward and charming encounters of these workers as they investigate their polished environments. The overall effect is a startling combination of the chaotic geometries of net.art with the beige pixelation of a poorly-lit Zoom meeting.

Often these disruptions are, like a glitchy Zoom call, internal to the systems themselves rather than imposed by artists or activists. This is the grounds for the intervention made by 'CAPTCHA Factory' into the CAPTCHA system used to verify human users. By identifying images and words, we prove our humanity while simultaneously training AI image recognition projects, itself a kind of bump in the smooth functioning of AI-capitalism: 'we are aware of our "work" when solving CAPTCHAs because we are forced to stop, look and act; while in many other instances people have become accustomed to simply provide their inputs and their personal data automatically, with no friction at all.' And this system of free labour births new opportunities for the paid kind, as shady businesses arise to subvert these systems by throwing pennies at clickworkers.

This leads to the conceptual pun the entire project turns upon, the invisible hand, which points to the apparent self-organizing magic of the market-oriented computational projects as well as the physical bodies of those toiling away in hidden abodes. Giorgi Gago Gagoshidze's film *The Invisible Hand of My Father* confronts this wordplay directly: Gagoshidze interviews his father, who fled the collapsing Soviet Union for Europe only to lose his right hand to a cement mixer in Portugal. Gagoshidze visualizes this sacrifice as a hyperreal digital manifestation superimposed over the landscape of the Caucasus where his father has returned to in his retirement.

Art's relevance to radical politics is in its ability to concretize the abstractions of capitalist totality, to embody its contradictory assemblages, and, perhaps, even provide materials for struggle. How best to go about this project of 'cognitive mapping' as Fredric Jameson terms it, is an open question that has bedeviled critical cultural producers for generations. Social realist portrayals of exploitation as in the films of Ken Loach? Mapping networks of political power and finance as in the diagrams of the late Mark Lombardi? Or perhaps a performative embrace of commodification and luxury as in Jeff Koons' kitsch? With *Silent Strategy* is a concrete one, aligned with the observation of Italian operaismo theorists that the motor of capitalism is the self-activity of the workers; that is, the way they attempt to organize themselves in struggles. These projects investigate those struggles, imagine future solidarities, and even attempt to precipitate new antagonisms to capital, all conducted on the terrain of the high-tech infrastructures of massive 'digital' companies where, stubbornly, flesh and blood and old-fashioned brains remain essential.

It is increasingly popular to imagine that the invisible hand of the market could be replaced by a different sort of spectre, one that harnesses the power of big data analytics for a planned economy that keeps our homes full of those familiar parcels while somehow removing the worst harms of global systems of power, exploitation and commodification. But whether market-based or planned, invisible hands are always connected to invisible bodies, invisible people, entire invisible communities. The utopian impulse in *Silent Works* is not an end goal of a cybernetic socialism, but something more modest, and also more urgent: that we can discover each other and turn our collective energies into a real antagonism against a relentless technologically enhanced capitalism.

You can find *Silent Works* video talks, artworks, booklets, online dossiers, workshop projects and audio documents tackling AI-capitalism's hidden labour on the *Silent Works* website.

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