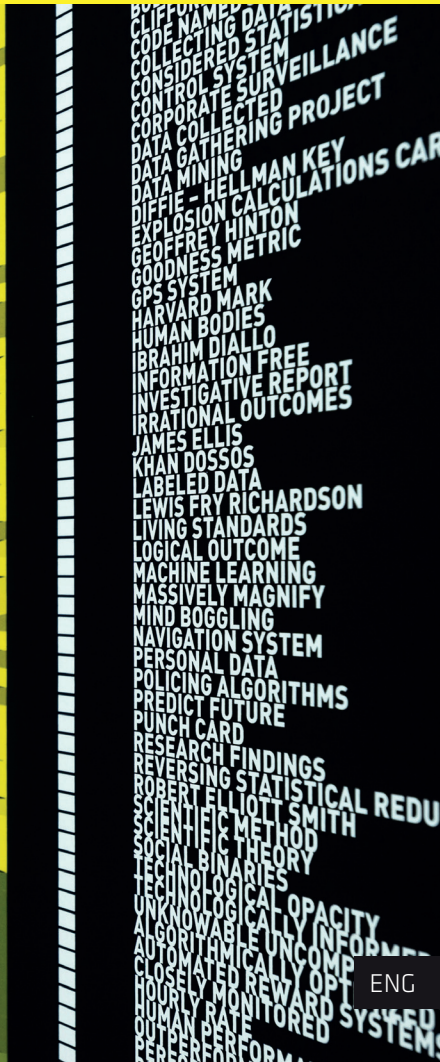
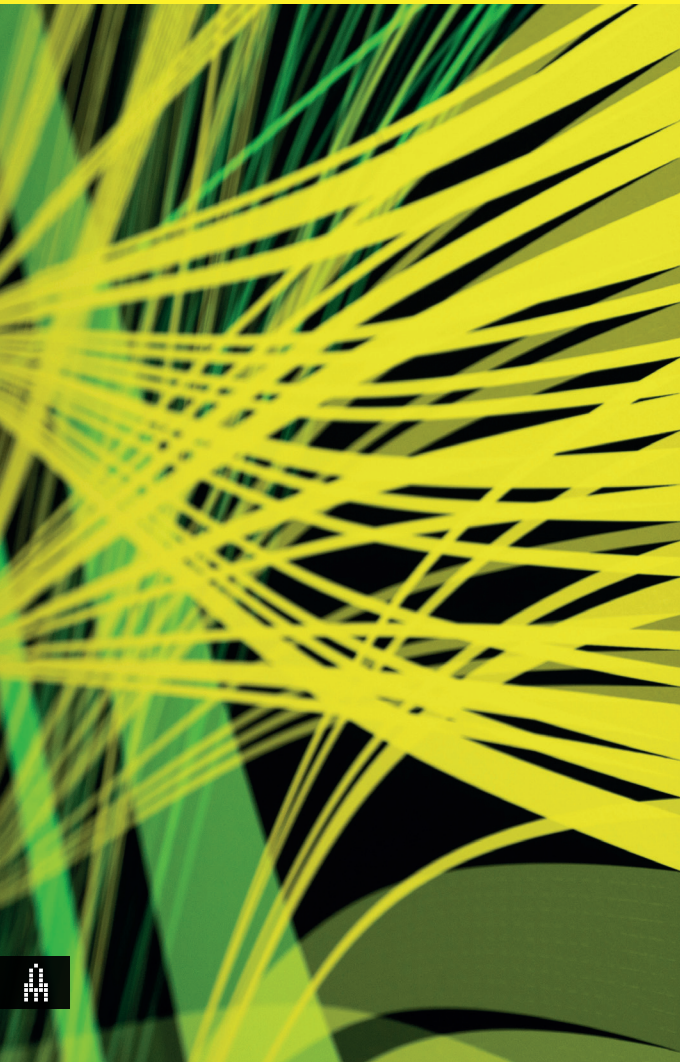


Aude Launay

THE RETURN OF THE DEAD AUTHOR



BLIPFORMED DATA
CODE NAMED DATA
COLLECTING STATISTICS
CONSIDERED SYSTEM
CONTROL SURVEILLANCE
CORPORATE SURVEILLANCE
DATA COLLECTED
DATA GATHERING PROJECT
DATA MINING
DIFFIE - HELLMAN KEY
EXPLOSION CALCULATIONS CAR
GEOFFREY HINTON
GOODNESS METRIC
GPS SYSTEM
HARVARD MARK
HUMAN BODIES
IBRAHIM DIALLO
INFORMATION FREE
INVESTIGATIVE REPORT
IRRATIONAL OUTCOMES
JAMES ELLIS
KHAN DOSSOS
LABELED DATA
LEWIS FRY RICHARDSON
LIVING STANDARDS
LOGICAL OUTCOME
MACHINE LEARNING
MASSIVELY MAGNIFY
MIND BOGGLING
NAVIGATION SYSTEM
PERSONAL DATA
POLICING ALGORITHMS
PREDICT FUTURE
PUNCH CARD
RESEARCH FINDINGS
REVERSING STATISTICAL REDU
ROBERT ELLIOTT SMITH
SCIENTIFIC METHOD
SOCIAL THEORY
TECHNICAL BINARY
TECHNOLOGICAL OPACITY
UNKNOWNLY INFORMED
ALGORITHMICALLY UNCOMP
AUTOMATICALLY UNCOMP
CLOSELY MONITORED OPT
HOURLY MONITORED SYSTEM
HUMAN DATA
OUTPUT PERFORM
PERFORMING

ENG



Aude Launay

THE RETURN OF THE DEAD AUTHOR

Whether to machines or to other humans, the distribution of the decision-making processes is a recurring theme in contemporary artistic research.

It should be said that the history of art is rich in complex questionings as to the figure of the author, and in particular their individuality: between the realization of the work, quite often detached from its conception (when crafted in workshops with assistants and apprentices, and in the event of subcontracting), the long history of commissions which has been blurring the notion of the instigator since Ancient Rome, the question of inspiration which would make the artist a mediator and no longer the origin of all things concerning their work, the readymade revolution which totally dissociates the artist's hand from a work that, from then on, ceases to re-present, but simply presents, and which will lead Roland Barthes, in the field of literature, to formalize this revolution under the expression 'the death of the author',¹ the very concept of the author will cover, over the centuries, multiple meanings.

When Sanela Jahić decided to produce a set of data based on her artistic practice over the past fourteen years, she not only followed in the footsteps of artists who made quantification both a subject and a medium (Hanne Darboven, On Kawara, Tehching Hsieh, Roman Opalka, or Susan Morris to quote just a few), but also stepped into the history of a blurrily defined author. Why is that? Because she did not merely produce this datafication of her art for the sake of it, she made it the material for her future art.

How? With the help of predictive algorithms, the same ones that are widely used in the mechanical, automotive, aerospace, and medical industries, but of course also in finance, retail, advertising, policing, insurance, health, suicidal tendencies analysis, workers management, and of course, elections.

1 Roland Barthes, 'The Death of the Author', *Aspen* 5+6, 1967.

As you may already know, those computer programs base their predictions on (more or less) large datasets from which they extrapolate information regarding the likelihood of certain situations. In order to do so, they can, for instance, refine information splitting it into micro-information pieces, or they can treat any piece of information multiple times... Many types of procedures can be chosen according to the kind of research that is to be conducted, with varying degrees of accuracy. The main ongoing question in the public debate regarding their increasing use is whether they will have the ability to fully replace human beings in the near future. The main fear propagated by the mass media being the loss of jobs in favour of automation (when it should probably be the fear of crime-predicting AIs, but shh...)



Photo: Janez Janša

Sanela Jahić
The Labour of Making Labour Disappear
Aksioma | Project Space, Ljubljana, 2018

The French legal scholar Alain Supiot clearly stated that ‘The contemporary ‘techno-science-economy’ imaginary [...] projects onto human societies the binary functioning characteristic of the logical trees at work in our ‘intelligent

machines', of the <if p ... then q, if not p... then x...>. It is not excluded that these machines will one day have the capacity to calculate everything that is calculable. But it is certain that the reduction of relations between people to operations of calculating utility or interest can only lead to violence. Human societies [...] need a common horizon in order to form and survive. A horizon, that is to say both a limit and the mark of a beyond, of a duty to be that tears their members away from the solipsism and self-reference of their being.² And this is precisely what Sanela Jahić's first artwork produced within the framework of this research³ points out when it highlights that all the predictions stemming from the algorithmic system are based on the past: algorithmic predictions lack a horizon! Or, as Supiot would word it beautifully: 'Since the horizon implies a three-dimensional universe, it is absent from the flat world, the Flatland of binary thinking.'⁴

On a rather far-flung timeline, one could relate these predictive algorithms to the figure of the *aoidos*, the classical Greek oral epic poet who was as much a 'transmitter' as the one modifying the transmission. In the oral epic tradition, poems were indeed sung, and those performances were at the same time characterized by their uniqueness and the tradition they were embedded in: 'he both repeats the song and invents it as he sings'. [...] In a sense, therefore, in the oral epic tradition, there is no origin, since the 'origin' just is the multiple rehearsals of a song.⁵

This conception of creativity suffered a long dark age of tyrannical necessity for originality and fixity, and even if some attempts at 'reusing' cultural material had been made throughout the last three centuries, it was not until the second half of the twentieth century that it could appear as the state of things, although it had to be theorized to be generally accepted as such. The main theorist of what was since then named 'postmodernism' was of course the philosopher Jean-François Lyotard, who warned, as early as 1979,

2 Alain Supiot, *Le travail n'est pas une marchandise, Contenu et sens du travail au XXIe siècle*, Paris, Éditions du Collège de France, 2019.

3 Jahić's research, which she started in early 2018, was presented in two exhibitions at the Aksioma | Project Space in Ljubljana: *The Labour of Making Labour Disappear* (2018) and *Uncertainty-in-the-Loop* (2020); for further information see <https://aksioma.org/labour> and <https://aksioma.org/uncertainty.in.the.loop>.

4 *Idem*.

5 Andrew Bennett, *The Author*, Routledge, 2004, p. 33.

that 'The nature of knowledge cannot survive unchanged within this context of general transformation. It can fit into the new channels, and become operational, only if learning is translated into quantities of information.'⁶ And he continued, writing that 'We can predict that anything in the constituted body of knowledge that is not translatable in this way will be abandoned and that the direction of new research will be dictated by the possibility of eventual results being translatable into computer language. [...] We may thus expect a thorough exteriorization of knowledge with respect to the 'knower''.⁷ And, if we follow Lyotard's thinking further down his essay, we see that it is actually the message that one conveys that empowers its bearer, not through its specific content, but through the way it places its bearer as a node into a network. Even if 'no one, not even the least privileged among us, is ever entirely powerless over the messages that traverse and position him at the post of sender, addressee, or referent'.⁸

Wouldn't this settle for a rather accurate definition of the contemporary author? And, even though Lyotard only mentions the human author in those very lines, what, in this definition, could prevent one from applying it to the prediction algorithms used by Jahić? One aspect that would still appear as a pitfall on this way of defining the author with the help of the messages going through them, is the question of their power over the messages that Lyotard refers to. The deep issue here is obviously, beyond the definition of the author, the definition of what is authored: what makes something the product of a specific authorship process? Is it consciously reaching decisions, as it has been considered for centuries, or is it, on the contrary, delegating one's decisions to subconscious or even external mechanisms? As Sanela Jahić points out when asked about the artists' interests in subconscious mechanisms and the way they clearly oppose creativity and consciousness while praising those mechanisms: 'for scientists, the unconscious is more deterministic than the conscious'.⁹

6 Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition* (1979), Manchester University Press, 1984, translated from French by Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi, p. 4.

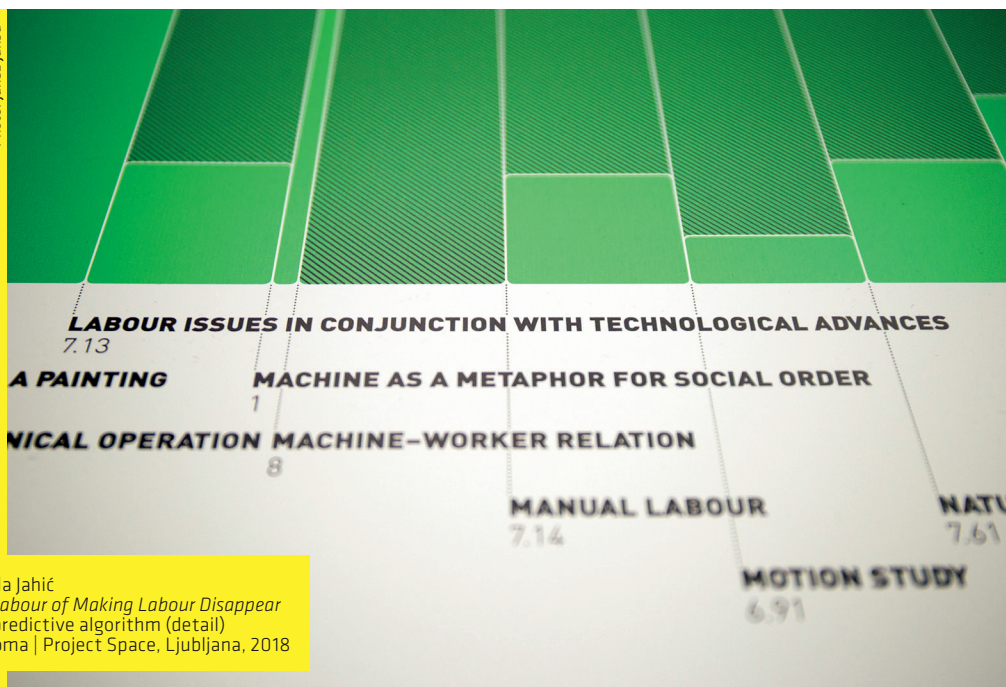
7 *Ibid.*

8 Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

9 Sanela Jahić in an unpublished interview with Aude Launay, 15 November 2020, Aksioma archive

She believes that noticing that her algorithms don't show any kind of style in their predictions, is a sign that her style was not recognized, and went on to explain that, of course, 'if an artist develops a style, this style can be deterministic, it puts them in a box'.¹⁰ Could style thus also oppose creativity?

Photo: Janez Janša



Sanela Jahić
The Labour of Making Labour Disappear
The predictive algorithm (detail)
Aksioma | Project Space, Ljubljana, 2018

This is, obviously, more complex than just stating it, and the topic provoked heated debates among theorists in the sixties and the seventies, as style was seen, by Barthes for instance, as a vertical dimension, as opacity, as conservative and bourgeois, as 'a vertical and lonely dimension of thought'¹¹ anchored in the personal history of the author, as opposed to the transparent forms of speech such as in Camus' *Stranger*. So, once again, just as in Greek epic poetry and prediction algorithms, style can be thought of as anchored in

¹⁰ Sanela Jahić in an unpublished interview with Aude Launay, 15 November 2020, Aksioma archive

¹¹ Roland Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero*, 1953, translated from French by Annette Lavers and Colin Smith, p. 11.

the past and proceeding from it. And, similar to machine learning computer programs, we can say that it depends on the data it is fed with. Contradicting traditional and common expectations about artificial intelligence—such as the neutrality and objectivity of the judgements its neural networks are programmed to make—Sanela Jahić used algorithmic systems to ‘determine the concept and the aesthetics of her next artwork’,

Sanela Jahić
Uncertainty-in-the-Loop
Aksioma | Project Space, Ljubljana, 2018



Photo: Domen Pal

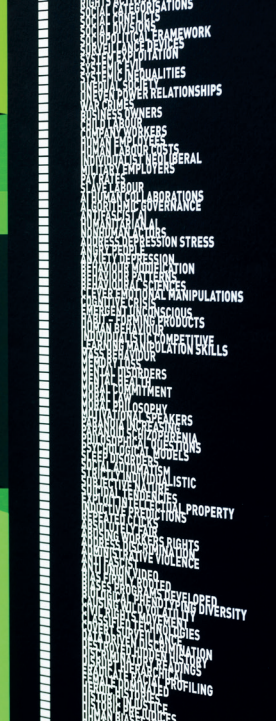
decisions that should be all but neutral and objective. As the classifiers in her database appear to be the most objective possible, we can read criteria such as: ‘measuring the productivity of intellectual labour’, ‘motions needed to perform the work’, and so on. Would picking from these and combining their data result in an artwork in the exact same sense of the term as if this had been produced by the artist without the prostheses of the algorithmic decision-making systems she had devised for this occasion? And, of course, the main question remains: can the predictive algorithms used here be considered the

author of the new artworks? If the difficulty lies in breaking away from the a priori understanding of these as mere tools, however complex they may be, a consideration taken from the thoughts of Michel Foucault allows us to add a building block to this edifice of doubt: 'texts, books, speeches began to really have authors [...] to the extent that the author could be punished, that is to say to the extent that the speeches could be transgressive'.¹²

Photo: Domen Pal



Sanela Jahić
Uncertainty-in-the-Loop
 The predictive algorithm (detail)
 Aksioma | Project Space, Ljubljana, 2020



12 Michel Foucault, 'Qu'est-ce qu'un auteur?', Bulletin de la Société française de philosophie, No 3, July-September 1969, p. 73-104.

Aude Launay
THE RETURN OF THE DEAD AUTHOR

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