Art in the Age of Intelligent Machines
Artie Vierkant, 2015

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> *Amongst humans, on the other hand, an interaction is actively* localized *by a set of partitions, frames, umbrellas, fire-breaks, which permit passage from a situation that is complex to one that is merely complicated. While I am at the counter buying my postage stamps and talking into the speaking grill, I don't have my family, colleagues or bosses breathing down my neck. And, thank heavens, the server doesn't tell me stories about his mother-in-law, or his darlings' teeth.[1]* – Bruno Latour

In 1987, Bruno Latour and Shirley Strum published a paper called *Redefining the social link* in the journal Social Science Information. The piece was a continuation of some of Latour's early work exploring the sociology of primate cultures, namely an attempt to determine whether for baboon societies "dominance [is] a fact or an artefact"[2]. Latour and Strum concluded that while baboon interaction had once been viewed as *asocial*—chaotic, unruly—in fact baboons were constantly engaged in a game of social interaction employing few mediators and little pre-assigned social stratification. With the introduction or loss of a new individual to a group, or with the meeting of one group and another, the relations between each individual would have to be consistently, *socially*, reassessed. Contrasting this with the sociality of human culture they proclaimed that "if actors have only themselves, only their bodies as resources, the task of building stable societies will be difficult."[3] The method of stabilizing society would then be to use "language, symbols, and

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[1] Bruno Latour, *On Interobjectivity*, p.233. Mind, Culture, and Activity journal. Vol. 3, No. 4, 1996, as translated by Geoffrey Bowker.
[2] Bruno Latour and Shirley Strum, *Redefining the social link: from baboons to humans*, p. 788. Social Science Information journal, Vol. 26, No. 4, December 1987.
[3] ibid., p. 790.

material objects … to simplify the task of ascertaining and negotiating the social order."[4]

From this foundation would come Latour's 'actor-network theory', as much a sociological tool as a philosophy.[5] The fundamentals, taken in broad strokes, of this theory are that everything, both subject and object, exists as a sum of its relations to other things, and that by extension no individual entity (Latour's 'actor') can have contact with another without mediation. In their paper Latour and Strum take the argument only to this point: with little to no mediation, the brunt of social organization rests in individual and tenuous social interactions, whereas with more varied and nuanced forms of mediation we enter into the state of "modern industrial societies … [in which] individuals are able to organize and 'mobilize' others on a grand scale … making social tasks *less complex* rather than making them more complex".[6]

It is fair to say that true subject to subject interaction is difficult without mediating objects, perhaps because *everything is mediation, and not*: we can see language or image/object as a thing in and of itself equally as we can see it as a representation of abstracted ideas or idioms. The creation of external objects makes interaction predictable where social beings are often unpredictable; it stabilizes and stores[7] modes of contact. We know money or a brick house have a socially constructed value equally as we know social mores (which we would count here as an 'object' or 'actor') will influence the way we think about our actions. Beyond this, metaphor, explanation, equivocation, classification, all serve to take the things we would have to otherwise grapple with *interobjectively*[8] and make them at least seem predictable.

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[4] ibid., p. 791.

[5] See arguments by Graham Harman in his books on Latour's metaphysics and political philosophy, *Prince of Networks* (2009) and *Bruno Latour: Reassembling the Political* (2014).

[6] Latour and Strum, p. 792.

[7] Paraphrasing from Villem Flusser's *Into the Universe of Technical Images*, 1985. "if images were to become models for actions, they had to be made accessible, intersubjective, and they had to be stabilized, stored. They had to be published." Text from the English edition, 2011, as translated by Nancy Ann Roth.

[8] "Interobjectivity" is a term used by Latour as well as Vivian Sobchack and Timothy Morton to describe the sociality of objects—the corollary of "intersubjective." See Latour, *On Interobjectivity* (1996); Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts* (2004); Morton, *Hyperobjects* (2013).

Art is particularly interested in this because artists are constantly engaged in a practice of creating mediating objects. These objects often act as stand-ins for ideas: a mediating reference point for an abstract philosophical notion, a political ideal, a literal reference to an object in the world (representational images), or an idiomatic play (the meta-referentiality of painting *about* painting, or the idiom of instiutional critique). This list is of course idealistic, as frequently art is seen as a mediating object not from the subjectivity of the viewer to an outside referent like those mentioned above, but instead a mediating object from the subjectivity of the viewer to *the subjectivity of the artist* ('those strokes could only be Rembrandt's', 'I love this Warhol because he was so smart to play so dumb') despite most expressive work being more the development of an idiom than the expression of unique genius.

Here it would be easy to write off the 'problem' of art works being little but mediating objects (dull materiel) by asserting that the locus of 'work' in art has shifted to the relational realm, whether in the public relations of the artist performing their identity[9] or in the now standard Relational Aesthetics idiom of the work being social interaction itself. A theory of society structured by ever more complex mediating objects would account for these as well, as here we are not talking about a classical *object*—what one would call physical, heavy, a 'real thing'—but a broad definition that includes the socially constructed relation itself as a mediating object. Put another way, just as a relational work claims to live in the interstice between participants, so it does: the relational artist constructs a social interaction between participants, and that social circumstance becomes the mediating object.

All of this assumes a metaphysical distinction between subject and object, a dualism that is variously and rightly refuted. For practical purposes, and because art discourse tends to favor a discussion of the

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[9] See Hito Steyerl, *The Terror of Total Dasein*, 2015. Dis.

viewer/subject relating to the work/object, I have no interest in disregarding that dualism here. A subject is something we could say has intentional agency whereas an object does not necessarily *intend*. However, particularly now that the work of art is understood as existing within relation itself, and as the nature of our everyday objects is changing, it may benefit us to complicate this duality by returning to Latour and Strum's proposition of society and mediating objects.

They state that as mediating objects (including structures of power) are added and maintained, social interaction becomes routinized to the point of vastly reduced complexity.[10] More and more objects replace more and more specific social negotiations.[11] Critically, they state that as social negotiations or interactions are supplanted with mediating objects, the more complex and sophisticated those objects must become. What Latour and Strum do not take into account is that we have arrived at a point in our society in which we are actively seeking to move beyond industrial automation towards creating fully subjective artificial intelligences. In other words, as our mediating objects become more intricate our objects grow to approximate subjects. This can be stated not just for artificial intelligences, which quite literally are made to develop their own unique subjectivities, but also for broader structures. Our communications, social, and logistical platforms have all reach such a degree of automation that some argue privatized services by companies like Google constitute what Benjamin Bratton calls a "platform sovereignty", equally as capable as a sovereign nation to create a state of exception.[12] This isn't just a problem of Silicon Valley technology companies, it's also one of more traditional structures which take up the procedural logics of those companies, like finance, property, and politics. Each of us has at one point experienced powerlessness in the face of overwhelming bureaucracy, overwhelming political gridlock, overwhelming debt.

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[10] Latour and Strum, p. 792.
[11] See also Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together*, 2011.
[12] Benjamin Bratton, *The Stack: On Software and Sovereignty*, 2015, p. 32.

The subject/object divide, then, while not fully repealable is certainly much more complex than its duality may appear. Rather than being a binary division it may be more readily viewed as a circular continuum. Thinking of it in this way, an artificial intelligence would be an object that became a subject, with a corporate or bureaucratic structure being an object that has *nearly* become subject. The inverse of these is harrowing.

A subject that has *nearly* become an object would almost certainly be described in terms of slavery, or someone in debt bondage, or to fall on Marxist terms an individual who in their work is subjected to becoming a mere extension/appendage of an automated machine.[13] "The person objectifies himself in production, the thing subjectifies itself in the person"[14].

However, interestingly, by this understanding the inverse of an artificial intelligence is *image*. By this I mean that if an artificial intelligence is an object that has become subject, the image of an individual is a subject that has become object. We already have this sociotechnical device for abstracting our interior subjectivity from our object-body. One could assume this device is photography and its related technologies—the best technical means we have of reproducing or creating what we consider to be an accurate pictorial representation of ourselves—but it is not. The central device we share for turning a subject into an object is *intellectual property*, and its various infrastructural components we vaguely refer to as 'image rights', 'personality rights', 'right of publicity', 'moral rights', and 'copyright.' We may have the rights to our selves, but at any time we have the option to be copied and abstracted from our own subjectivity to any means imaginable. Once we agree to the transfer of our image rights, whether by signing a model release contract or agreeing to it as a term of service, the abstraction of our image from our selves is authorized.

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[13] Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The Manifesto of the Communist Party*, 1848.
[14] Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*, 1858, p. 89.

With enough (or the right kind of) images of an individual it is now possible to create a fully realistic 'digital double' of an individual's most unique and readily identifiable aspect: their object, their body.

This leaves art at an interesting standpoint. The modernist project's way of rationalizing the developments of 20th century art history is to say, for example, that painting was fundamentally transformed by photography, in that photography provided a new medium and idiom in which to create representational imagery. This is said to have freed painting to focus instead on the very meta-structure of the medium. Similarly those projecting a holistic view of photography as a medium apart from others have been adjusting for some time to the advent of digital technologies and the various ways they challenge the way an image is constructed (true equally for sculpture and architecture). Poets have grappled as well with medium disruption, as Kenny Goldsmith and Craig Dworkin have each noted that what photography did to painting, copy/paste has done for writing.[15]

The question now is what *intelligent objects* will do to art objects of all categories.

After all, each of the mediatic shifts above are in some way a response to an increasing lack of fixity of traditional expressive mediums. As medium boundaries dissolve, or more accurately as objects begin to represent a chimeric union of physical substance and virtual model, our objects begin to be made in response to our understanding of what these virtual 'nonobjects' *could be*. If this is our response to nonobjects, we could expect the effects of nonhuman subjects (intelligent objects) to be much greater.

To think about this we must consider what intelligent objects have already done to art. We can extend our understanding of intelligent objects beyond 'artificial intelligences' to also include in our discussion any format that is sufficiently developed as to become

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[15] Craig Dworkin and Kenny Goldsmith, *Against Expression: An Anthology of Conceptual Writing*, p. xvii.

what we could call an 'objectivity' (much like 'subjectivity', but for the agency of an object). If we do so this can address AIs to be sure, but this can also refer to any of the previously identified highly developed objects: bureaucracy, politics, finance, etc. Idioms themselves can be considered in this way, in that they become a format seemingly with their own demands and establish certain standards of action or production. A set of highly developed objectivities has already greatly influenced artists and the work of art. In creating mediating objects, artists usually rely on the use of particular formats that have a history of being understood *as* art objects.

Put another way, the difference between the format or idiom the art object belongs to and the specific manifestation of the art object will allow for the object's message or intention to be understood. For the work to act effectively as a mediator it presents a negative space between what it is and the qualities it shares with similar objects. This is the core of what I have been referring to so far as 'idiom', the unifying characteristics of a work that allows it to be identifiable as a part of a category (including relational objects, which often use the idiom of social gathering or direct interaction).

The tools used to create art function in this way as well. New media artists have referred to this idea as "defaults",[16] directly referencing the way in which highly developed software is designed to make a number of aesthetic or functional decisions for the user *by default*, which it is up to the user to change or accept. The pervasiveness of these defaults, however, means they are also idiomatic and by extension a type of objectivity. This makes the question of standards, idioms, or defaults relevant not just of software like Photoshop, which almost every young artist today will have to grapple with, but also of printmaking standards, material tolerances, physics limitations in sculpture, or what hand tools are available. Or, to borrow from Marcel Duchamp's addendum on the readymade, "since the tubes of paint used by an artist are manufactured and ready made products we

[16] Brian Droitcour, *Constant Dullaart Re-codes the Readymade*, Art in America, March 2009.

must conclude that all the paintings in the world are 'readymades aided' and also works of assemblage."[17]

Understanding this set of concerns as objectivities means that to this list of paint, material, physics, and software we can add a new set of idioms to make 'readymade': bureaucratic structures, managerial practices, legal restrictions, territories.

To think of how further intelligent objects will affect the art object, it is helpful to think of the artist (or 'art worker') as then situated in the interstice between these objects—circulating idioms, materials, and relational forces—as an individual interacting with a number of objectivities.

If we take the artist as 'art worker', then a critique of Marx's formulation of the worker can provide a valuable reading of the artist's interaction with objectivities. Ever the pessimist towards machines and automation—objectivities—Marx does provide a valuable alternative to his own pessimism in a section from *Grundrisse* labeled as "*Contradiction between the foundation of bourgeois production (value as measure) and its development. Machines etc.*" His thoughts here echo (as they rarely do) Latour and Strum's claims that more complex and varied mediating objects reduce the complexity of social interaction, but in the place of interaction is labor itself: "real wealth manifests itself … in the monstrous disproportion between the labor time applied, and its product, as well as the qualitative imbalance between labour, reduced to a pure abstraction, and the power of the production process it superintends."[18] Marx provides an argument which would seem to point the way towards what we would now call post-industrial society (for which, it is worth noting, it seems the conditions have still not been met, despite arguments to the contrary) wherein "no longer does the worker insert a modified natural thing

[17] Marcel Duchamp, *Lecture at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, October 19, 1961*. Published in Art and Artists, Vol. 1, No. 4, July 1966.
[18] Karl Marx, *Grundrisse, Notebook VII*, 1858, p. 705.

[*Naturgegenstand*] as middle link between the object [*Objekt*] and himself … he steps to the side of the production process instead of being its chief actor."[19] This directly shadows Latour and Strum's later conclusion that with the development of socially mediating objects "the social bond can be maintained in the relative absence of the individuals"[20]. Just as it is possible for the automation of labor to make labor irrelevant (Marx calls this post-industrial ideal "the development of the social individual"[21]) it is also possible for the mediation of social interaction to make the social irrelevant.

Neither seem to have particularly come true, which isn't entirely surprising considering the affairs of reality rarely match the most cleanly expected results. A few years after Latour's paper with Strum, he addresses this issue directly in a piece about Machiavelli, saying "whenever the introduction of a machine does <u>not</u> attack the workers, many Marxists are left speechless … when companies create highly skilled workers they see this as a puzzling exception, or even, in MacKenzie's terms as an 'obverse trend'."[22]

This necessitates an allowance of a more complex interaction between machine and worker that reflects also a more complex reality of the interaction between object and subject, or between actors associating through mediating objects. An awareness of mediating objects lets us acknowledge, for example, that the mediators we create are, in their complexity, actively objectifying us. Proprietary software tracks our every move, purchase, and interaction online; government intelligence agencies watch and listen to what we say and who we say it to, comparing it constantly and consistently with others to attempt to define a threat; we are aware that the following legalese is socially validated: "you agree to allow unrestricted permission, right, and perpetual license to use your name, voice and likeness … in and by any media now known or hereafter developed, throughout the entire

[19] ibid., p. 705.
[20] Latour and Strum, p. 792.
[21] Marx, p. 705.
[22] Bruno Latour, *How to Write 'The Prince' for Machines as Well as for Machinations.* Technology and Social Change, ed. Brian Elliott, Edinburgh University Press, 1988, p. 26. Emphasis Latour's.

world."[23] David Joselit has accurately highlighted this type of objectifying interaction as "To Profile", an act that is done to us not just by intelligent objects but also by ourselves, as when we create user profiles or decide in what manner we will display our best self through a mediating object.[24] Benjamin Bratton arrives at a similar conclusion, extending the act of profiling to intelligent objects as well: "human and nonhuman *Users* are positioned … as comparable and even interchangeable through a wide-ranging and omnivorous quantification of their behaviors and effects."[25]

Whether self-created or formulated by external objectivities, this 'profile' is a mediating object—like the work of art—and it would help to understand it as such. This may mean we could say that for the most part what interests us in art are not artists themselves but idioms, or even that *there are not artists, only idioms*. This is not a rebuke of individual agency so much as to say that we can understand artists as well as their products as objects within a vaster system. The work of art as a mediating object then fulfills a role as a relational actor in itself—as mentioned before it is not only able to be viewed as an object in its own right, but also in a Latourian sense as an actor, or a sum of its relations. It exists not just in the 'material' object but in mediated accounts (what we would call 'secondary information'), as an appendage of the social understanding of the individual artist as an actor, and in relation to society itself.

The way in which subject and object seem to be collapsing through such actors as images and intelligent objects may account for the rise in untraditional artist methodologies related to the production of objects. If an artificial intelligence, a corporation, a legal system, a bureaucracy, can be understood as a subjectivity then the aesthetics those subjectivities create when they *profile* themselves opens an entire field of speculative action. Poet Christian Bök claims that "poetry in

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[23] Semi-standard model release form for film and television.
[24] David Joselit, *What to Do with Pictures*, October journal, issue 138, Fall 2011, p. 86.
[25] Benjamin Bratton, *The Stack: On Software and Sovereignty*, 2015, p. 71. Emphasis Bratton's.

the future will be written by machines for other machines to read"[26], which we could just as easily extend to the entirety of cultural affairs and of course to art; however, what may come to pass is that the most interesting propositions will come out of the messy and contentious period to come in which subject and object encircle themselves.

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[26] As quoted by Kenny Goldsmith, *The Challenges of Twenty-First Century Writing*, Harriet Foundation Poetry Blog, April 2010.

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