

ROMY DAY WINKEL — PREFACE: RIPPING THE SEAMS APART, TOGETHER

Two years ago I experienced the luxury of being on the receiving end of a grant, which allowed me to buy a new computer. My old one was a thick laptop that, instead of glistening with newness, crackled from crumbs underneath its keyboard. My new computer is thin. It is wireless with the exception of one cable wrapped in an elegant yet sturdy weaving; its screen flexes its young joints when moving up and down. But as much as I like it for its aesthetic qualities, I have also come to see it as a symbol and symptom of a larger issue in contemporary technologies: a sense of seamlessness. When working on this computer, I am in no way reminded of the physical and energetic space that is needed to store my data. Its thinness even seems to obfuscate this concern, let alone the copper, gold, aluminum, tin, and tungsten—so-called “conflict minerals” due to their potential origin in the Democratic Republic of Congo—that are carefully hidden inside.

But the opacity only begins with hiding these materials: the seamless browsing experience also reproduces a certain type of computer-user subjectivity. What kind of assumptions are made about this subject’s (dis)abilities? And which subjects are otherwise excluded from this idea?

In an attempt to shine light on often forgotten or hidden technological processes and strategies, the nine artist-researchers who completed a fellowship trajectory at Gerrit Rietveld Academie and Sandberg Instituut have been working on three themes over the last year: *An Accessible Data Praxis*; *Materials, Displaced*; and *Sensory (Non)citizenship*. Their preliminary results, in the shape of performances, a workshop, and exhibited works, have been shared with the public during the one-day symposium *Curves of Inquiry* and each present a different approach toward these matters of contention.

Disruption Through the Pause

One way of disrupting the spell of seamlessness is to break *into* material. In Alaa Abu Asad’s

research this takes the shape of a pause, as they aim to draw attention to the language around the Japanese knotweed (or *Fallopia japonica*). This plant is often described as “invasive,” “toxic,” and “unwanted” and they quickly found out the same goes for other descriptions of plants, trees, and other “unwanted” species in general. When thinking about seamlessness, one way to keep going is to *dismiss* these particular species along the way, which happens clearly in the language of botanical nomenclature as dissected by Asad. By drawing a parallel between Dutch colonial history and the treatment of various plants in their performance, to finally speaking from the perspective of the plant—“I am Japanese knotweed! A troublemaker!”—Asad forces a pause, a break, and thereby disrupts the *business-as-usual* ways in which violence is often doused. In a similar strategy, Patrícia Domingues’s research shows an interest in making things *tangible*. Departing from researcher Kate Crawford’s notion that media is not an extension of human senses but rather an extension of the Earth and its resources, Domingues wants to highlight how technologies are made of and dependent on mineral and geological resources. She acknowledges that seamlessness, as described earlier, can make it seem like technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI) or the internet are immaterial, almost spectral, forces. Domingues insists on taking a pause too and calls attention to the increasing consumption of the mineral world to maintain contemporary technologies.

Domingues’s work consists of small stone-like objects made of silicon and Portuguese lithium: mineral components that are often found in batteries and computer circuits. By focusing on drilling and fragmenting these materials and in turn reconstructing them into objects, she brings to the fore the hidden reality of digital and electronic equipment. One can clearly see her background in jewelry shine through in these objects, as they could easily be worn as a necklace or pin, and she is exploring what this type of human engagement with these objects would do

in terms of the materials' common concealment.

A research project that takes the same strategy of the pause, but with an almost opposite outcome, is the work of Zaira Pourier. Her fellowship research is presented in the space as a perfectly concealed object: a cardboard box wrapped in tape with the recipient's address and all kinds of stickers and barcodes that accompany shipping such a large object. Pourier's research evolves around artefacts from the African and Caribbean diaspora and how they are often found in western households. This closed box contains some of these artefacts, but Pourier decided to keep the box sealed: a containment that echoes protection, showing respect for the objects' cultural and historical significance. This formal commitment strikes me as a powerful move: to study artefacts that have often been stolen by white settlers on colonized land, only to leave them wrapped once "returned." It forces the viewer to pause and wonder what is kept inside. But instead of revealing what's hidden, Pourier emphasizes their veiling.

Collective Browsing and the Absurd

If one takes the problem of seamlessness seriously, it points toward a lack of collectivity too. When I browse my new computer, it is a solitary experience aimed at self-sufficiency and smoothness—but for who? The fellowship research of MELT shines a different light on this issue. In their concern for disability and trans* justice, they made the IBC: *the Imagining Backwards Computer*. In its accompanying video, in which chronology is purposefully and joyfully absent, the IBC aims to intervene in the canonical view of various technologies. For example, it looks into a handheld computer that can read braille aloud, which is an invention that is often erased from the techno-scientific canon. MELT's installation also contains a couple of objects sewn from an orange latex-like material with black stitching and sharpie writing, which also play a part in their video. I am invited to hold the objects and am pleased by its material qualities: a soft orange matte plastic juxtaposes with a harder material underneath. These objects are haptic reconfigurations of the technologies, such as the handheld braille computer, that MELT aims to unforget.

Another way to create a more accessible

and collective browsing experience is to experiment with DIY self-sufficient servers and coding. Fellow Sandra Golubjevaite's research culminated in a code and non-code writing workshop, in which she hands all participants a HTML cheat sheet and gives a brief overview of self-hosting and DIY servers. Golubjevaite explains how the seamless browser experience is a matter of privacy, climate preservation, and commerce, but also a matter of the necessity to stay connected 24/7 that has become so common for many people with smartphones over the years. To make a DIY server, I learned, is not only important in the sense that it makes visible the materiality of using a computer, but also, one can only have access to it when one is in the space of the server. There is some type of intimacy to be located there, especially in the context of an increase in remote working since the Covid-19 pandemic. Golubjevaite states that this way of working with code and hardware is obviously not accessible and desirable for everyone, but it is one strategy to disrupt the atomized and obfuscating ways of contemporary technologies.

If one was to succumb to a generous reading of AI and machine-learning, they could say that there is something radical to be located in the inherently collective relationship between its data input and its output. Research fellow Andrea López Bernal seems to toy with this idea in her AI-generated performance. Here, López Bernal introduces herself by showing the audience her passport and tells them which pills she is taking, which contraceptives she uses, which lipstick is her favorite. The audience learns that she loves her grandfather as she stumbles over her words, moves a table around, and sits down with the casual coolness of a teenage boy. Toward the end of the performance, she sets up the center of the space for a Dia de los Muertos ritual, involving the passing around of a bottle of alcohol, pine needles, and candlelight, which she finally extinguishes by spitting on its flame. The performance's random chronology of acts, almost confessional in nature, does not necessarily reveal a strong belief in AI as a collective knowledge machine, but rather pokes fun at the choppy and absurd dramaturgy that it creates.

Living Together, in Ruins

Even if many strong points have been raised

against the extractive, inaccessible, and unsustainable use of resources for contemporary technologies, one still has to face living in this reality. How does one stay with the trouble? A possible approach to this is to turn to techno-utopianism, as Aaro Murphy has done in his research. He dove into the evolving relationship between climate, aroma technologies, and interior atmospheres. Mirroring the techniques used in climate science to analyze air quality, Murphy's research led him to the convergence of aroma capture, gas chromatography, and electronic noses. His video work unveils a fictional narrative woven around a city observed through the lens of an electronic nose. As this fragrant perspective evolves, a script emerges, guiding the creation of this video that encapsulates the speculative potential of electronic nose technology.

Contrary to this techno-utopian avenue, fellow Olya Korsun aims to build a life in techno-capitalist ruins with her prototype for an interactive play. She acknowledges the power of the utopian imaginary, but wonders what happens if one looks the painful reality of war, ecological crisis, and violence in the eye. How does one befriend mental illness? How does one celebrate the desert? Instead of fighting or escaping, Korsun asks what happens when one reconciles with these harsh realities. It reminds me of Charlie Clemoes's work, in the sense that they both capture the destructive nature of this time but still attempt to move through it. In his video titled *Ymere Flattened Our Neighbour's Vegetable Patch*, Clemoes narrates the demolishing of a small garden in front of his flat in Amsterdam. The voice-over of the video consists of Clemoes calling a friend to recall what happened, while the viewer can see how Clemoes witnesses this demolition, discussing it with his neighbor. This work highlights not only the way in which destruction of this type disrupts the social fabric of a building or neighborhood, it also emphasizes the importance of contact and solidarity between neighbors and friends in dealing with this type of ruination.

In Korsun's play, the audience goes back to a destroyed garden, which in turn can be moved around as modular pieces of decor. I imagine walking through this set, encountering a script: How does one tell apart ruins from waste? What can they do with all this mess? By decentering the singular artist's voice through her interactive set, Korsun collectivizes the imagination

of contemporary living. Although one may need to build a life in ruins, at least it is possible to do it with others, together.