

ABSURDISM

Annet DEKKER and Olga GORIUNOVA

This is a draft chapter submitted to the Encyclopedia of New Media Art, ed. Charlie Gere, forthcoming from Bloomsbury

Keywords

Politics, body, identity, infrastructure, system, form

Much of digital media art is absurd. Or, to put it another way, there is something about digitality itself that has a haunting sense of absurdity. As a starting point, we can say that over the last few centuries western culture repeatedly found technology, from mechanisms to automation, somewhat absurd. It is also the case that modernity itself, in the way it operates through the reflexive distance of rationality and its ruptures, has been perceived as headless, or rather soulless, and thus inclined towards the absurd. Consequently, art of the modern day and one that seriously engaged technological media inescapably has had an element of absurdity about it or in any case had to deal with absurdism even if to try to overcome it completely. In what follows, we focus on digital media absurdity and draw upon artworks to saturate the notion of absurdism with density that does justice to digital media art. Throughout this essay, we will be giving pointers to a possible definition of digital media art absurdism, or alternatively the absurdity of digital art.

Body and Identity

New media art pioneers, choosing to work with the new material of digital media, had to reckon with dial up internet, low bandwidth, screen and image resolution, glitching software, narrow expressive range of graphics, a handful of forms inherited from the industrial paper office, such as folders, bins and buttons, finding themselves in a dimension that was as exciting as it was frustrating. In the 1990s the abundance of human sensorium had to be reduced and partially shut off to engage with the online. What new media art lacked in digitality, in terms of variety of material, shape, colour, form, spatial depth, biology, speed, sound, scent, it compensated for with global connectivity and communication, collaboration, automation, computer logic and calculative power, information complexity and many other new and exciting capacities. In the 2020s, human sensorium is thoroughly digitised, dataified and computed for prediction. Nevertheless, *there is a sense of incongruity at the base of digitality*. We feel it as a divorce between the intense attention of the eye and the ache in the bottom from prolonged seating, frustration at interruption in streaming and exasperation at an online booking system. It is there in the unsustainable addiction to social media, in the absurdity of the “Instagram face”, in the scroll of doom, and in putting one’s best self who couldn’t be further away from who one really is, on one’s Facebook page. The incongruity rests in the rupture or enforcement of sensation, the cunning of representation, swerving intensification of human-digital processing we learn to rely on, block out or put up with.

The merger and translation of sensory experience onto the digital media took absurd comic forms in some of the early net art projects that focused on the fault lines of the body. Sensation is not a blissful hideout from the unbearableness of rationality; it can be overwhelming and disorientating. Alexei Shulgin’s *This Morning* (1997) is a simple webpage with black words on white background, “Well I woke up this morning and

realised that”, followed by pop-up windows with different messages, including, “I want to eat”, “I want to drink”, “I want to piss”, “I want to work”, “I want to f**k”, “I want to smoke” etc, with sliding “all at once” scattered around the index page. “Desires are tearing me apart”. At some level, this project is an existentialist declaration of absurdity. Repetitive and exceptionally plain, its performance is delineated by the mechanistic dynamics limited to the HTML of 1997, and even today it is overwhelming. The viewer has to “enable pop up windows” in their browser; they will then have to force their browser to quit, as the popping up windows don’t go away.

On the most superficial level, digitality involves dealing with ruptures in human sensorium so that we find delight in gestural, necessarily formalist and in a certain way minimalist artworks that work with this medium. Shulgin’s *FUFME* (2000) is another absurd attempt to quench bodily needs with the offering of networked communication. Pronouncedly unworkable with visibly impossible, at least for female users, designs for having sex online, the project is all but mockery of human sexual drive. It’s rude, and not only in its topic. Neither intimacy nor exhibitionist eroticism conjugate with computer graphics of the surgery room clarity depicting the imaginary product. Formalism, noted Mikhail Bakhtin in 1920s, exhibits a nihilistic tendency. *FUFME* is nihilistic, and not necessarily in its treatment of the human body. It is a mockery of technological revolution and capitalism, eager to valorise any new development. Multiple networked sexual toys, aiming at commercial success, were developed in the years following, making *FUFME* into a cautionary tale. If early art projects engaged complexly constructed emotion (Paul Sermon, *Telematic Embrace*, 1992), today designing for addiction means engaging directly with the release of hormones.

ZIX an iPhone app launched in 2012 during the hype of app productions by the Dutch / Belgium duo JODI is perhaps less nihilistic, but similarly absurd in how it addresses the human body. Looking at the mobile phone as an extension of bodily functions, the app instructs the user to perform movements, ranging from spinning and swinging the phone to blowing into the microphone, searching for the North and standing still. The movements are captured and played back, intercepted by a flashing mix of images in between. The project is often described as staging a participatory performance, but the absurdity of such a soliloquy of actions is clearly delineated by the choice of movements that are outside of the usual repertoire of human-machine interaction. Yet, these movements are easy to do. The absurd is illogical even when it is visibly logical, like instructions to perform banal physical movements in space. It addresses the physical relation bodies have with small machines, which in some cases may lead to near sightedness, de-regulation of muscles and a need for physiotherapy.

Considering three examples above makes it clear that the absurdism of digitality is not founded on disembodiment. In other words, *the incongruity of the digital absurd is not a mismatch between the body and the mind*. To extend the argument further, the body, but also gender and ethnicity are not reducible to biological realities and are constructed in multiple dimensions of human experience, whether online or offline. There is a wealth of scholarship and art dealing with, for instance, racialisation online, which began in the 1990s and continues today in relation to algorithmic bias (Nakamura, 2007). Neither such incongruity rests within the “superiority of the analogue”, whether it is a sensation, experience or quality of time and space. Brian Massumi aligned the analogue, as a physical property of waves of sound, light, temperature or

voltage to sensation, incompleteness, and ultimately, a potential for “thinking and imaging virtuality”, while linking the digital and discrete to quantification, predictive calculation of possible options and, thus, possibilistic control (Massumi, 137, 2002). At the end of his essay, Massumi proposes that instead of obsolescence, there is a continuing cooperation and intertwinement of the analogue and the digital.

Indeed, there is a constant and smooth translation of analogue into digital into analogue, for instance, in the operation of loudspeakers or headphones, and we don't find them absurd. Quantified body devices can be helpful to people. The digital engages our bodies and emotions directly, before we know it. Still, throughout decades and including today, technical imagination of the body, emotion and sensation keep bordering on keen absurdity, whether it is *FUFME*, Google Glass or metaverse. It offers a human user a reconfiguration that includes a certain openness to violence, new, subtle and previously unknown kinds of upset, assault and grievance. Violence is absurd by default.

A great number of projects work with this theme. Gordan Savičić in his *Constraint City. The Pain of Everyday Life* (2008) created a corset with high torque servo-motors and a WIFI-enabled game-console to be worn as a fetish object. As the user walks around the city, the sensors pick up wireless signal of nearby encrypted networks. The higher the wireless signal strength, the tighter the corset becomes. *Constraint City* maps a city in terms of the strength and volume of wireless networks while mapping the body with bruises. Various kind of bruising is common with digital media, whether it is a result of being individually targeted by trolls or a systemic outcome, for instance, a feature of the job of social media content moderator (Eva and Franco Mattes, *Dark Content*, 2015). Eva and Franco Mattes' *BEFNOED [By Everyone, For No One, Every Day]* (2014–) was created by asking anonymous workers across the world to perform simple actions based on text instructions in front of a webcam. The work recalls conceptual art practices in which instructions scribbled on small notes were enough to be art, and responds, at the same time, to the labour critical works that emerged when mechanical turks became more commonly known and used. The artists distributed the resulting videos via Tumblr for the occasional viewer to encounter, yet the art public in the galleries was forced into a series of physically awkward and bizarre positions, making them take on the in the context of art production. Here the body as workforce is reassociated with the social and political labour conditions of the new reality of human-machine relations.

A striking example of the violence of the construct of race is the eBay auction of *Keith Obadike's Blackness* in August 2001. The auction was part of the “black.net.art” actions by artists duo Mendi + Keith Obadike and it began on 8 August to be online for ten days. After four days and twelve bids, reaching \$152.50, eBay closed the auction, quoting “inappropriateness” of the item. Following the default descriptions of eBay, the bid started with enumerating the pros of buying Blackness, such as “This Blackness may be used for securing the right to use the terms ‘sista’, ‘brotha’, or ‘nigga’ in reference to black people. (Be sure to have certificate of authenticity on hand when using option)”, and juxtaposing it with a list of “warnings” of the downsides of owning a black identity, for instance, “The Seller does not recommend that this Blackness be used during legal proceedings of any sort. The Seller does not recommend that this Blackness be used while seeking employment”. Amplifying the idea of generic Blackness while simultaneously emphasizing its absurdity, the project

undermined the popular idea of emancipatory potential of identity play of the early web. Instead, Keith Obadike emphasized that web technologies, and their myths, were based on “the language of Western colonialism, from Netscape Navigator to Internet Explorer, eBay.com and Amazon.com” (Dean 2019: 171), linking libertarian enthusiasm to the history of colonialism and slavery. By layering bodies, minds and technologies in an acerbic response to the idea of web-based emancipation, Mendi + Keith Obadike show how companies as well as platforms and their publics continue racialising people.

The discussion of gender and technology has its own entry in this volume. Here, we would like to briefly mention *GashGirl* by Francesca da Rimini et al. (1997). Francesca da Rimini's alter ego doll yoko or GashGirl emerged already in the mid 1980s, but her ghostly character developed into an absurd virtual identity in the mid 1990s through various e-mail relationships and narrative exchanges in online communities. Partly collected together in the novel *FleshMeat* (1998), an infinite pond of dead girls in dollspace appears to critique the misrepresentation and misrecognition of women in all aspects of life. Extrapolating from the mad woman's hysteria to the unborn female fetuses, Da Rimini's ghosts roam the web. Mimicking the behaviour of artificial intelligence, the ghosts are a combination of poetry and techne in which “all women are ghosts and should rightly be feared”, and “all history is pornography”. The emphasis on bodily fluids, orgasms and female genitals are means to re-embody, refresh and resexualise the (male) dominance and resist the idea of cold and objective data. Rejoicing in the absurd, the ghosts embody the gender-specific and social power relations that are still present today. From the embodiment of exotic coloniality in *Bindigirl* (Prema Murthy, 1999) and the seemingly innocent yet disturbing character of *Mouchette* (Mouchette, 1996), to the Instagram influencers of today, women still appear to be the Other.

It is important to make one final comment to this part. It is tempting to say that technology is easily employed to reinforce racism and patriarchy, capitalism and colonialism, thus aligning the dismissal of new media to the older trend of distrust of technology that includes mechanisms, methods and scientific thought of the last 500 years. In a long line of scholars, Bergson offered a theory of the comical as the “mechanical encrusted upon the living”, contrasting the vital and the mechanic, and Husserl was concerned with the “mathematisation of nature”, i.e. the remaking of the lived world in the image of formal mathematical models that had been originally derived or related to the world but come to objectify and subsume the world (Bergson, 1914; Husserl, 1970). Here, in other words, the claim for transcendence of mathematics, made by Galileo and marking the beginning of modern science itself, leads to the superimposition of mathematical idealities over concrete things that are then made in their image. Decolonial scholars argued that certain philosophies of the Enlightenment propelled by modern science enabled dispossession of first nations. Feminist scholars showed how women were identified with “bodies” and denied access to the activities of the “cogito”. Here, technology as part of modern science cannot escape rightful accusations. But the absurdism of the digital *does not rest entirely within the reductiveness of instrumentality, violence of rationality or objectification of the world.*

The scholarship of Donna Haraway, Katherine Hayles, Bernard Stiegler, Matthew Fuller, Laura Marks, and many others offers an understanding of technology as co-constitutive of and with the human, as our politics, ecology, memory and architecture,

part of our flesh, seeing, writing, stuff of cultures. Such co-constitution cuts across scales to arrive at a level if not of complete indifferenciation but undisableable forms of mutual informing. This view is cognisant of conflictual in-formation, of paradoxes, tensions, tears and catastrophes. It rebukes the attempts to put technology into a black box of seamless logic. Indeed, to talk about *incongruity of digital media is to discuss distancing and incomprehension, oddness and misfitting, ruptures and conflicts, mad intensifications, violence and glitches in all formations and at all scales*. These are incongruities not and not only between human and machine, body and mind, sensation and logic of code, but *within* humans and *within* the machines, within flesh and ideas, and within sensations and forms of rationality *as well as amongst them*. These are not incongruities between kinds of things, but within things themselves, in their hybrid technical, cultural, political, and abstract formations.

In this way, digital media absurdism is a radically reconfigured and redefined but true descendant of the absurdism variously practised and theorised in the twentieth century.

Form and Politics

Early absurdism, especially of cabaret Voltaire, Tzara and Dada has been linked to the First World War and the incongruity between political craftsmanship, on one hand, and the massive loss of human life, on the other. Mechanisation of killing by early military technology has all but progressed towards the Second World War, another atrocity placed at the heart of the Theatre of the Absurd. Here, the incongruity between the victory of secular rationality and the irrationality of the kinds of lives and deaths enforced by it graduates into a conflicted distance between, as McLuhan put it, the man of action and impossibility to take action. Our current political modality is irresolvability, constructed following the invention of the nuclear bomb through the calculation of the strategies of deterrence.

But it's not only the imploding senselessness of possible total annihilation that is responsible for art's absurdism. The early poetry of the absurd, including Appolinaire, Alfred Jarry's pataphysics, Tzara, some elements of Fluxus, and Soviet absurdists such as Kharms and Vvedensky, but also Platonov, framed absurdity through socio-political lenses, through reframing knowledges and ontologies, through materialist Marxist approach to language, engagement with twentieth century revolutions through class, artistic form, and possibility of the future, among many other imperatives. Here again, we have conflicts and ruptures, incongruity between speeds of invention and adaptation, political demand and poetic work, social realities and possibilities.

The early new media art's political context was the fall of the Berlin wall, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the destruction of the bipolar global political order. Far from being a univocal victory of capitalism, it was an incredibly difficult time, of hope and the loss of hope, of orphaned political projects, unsolved problems and abandonment. Throughout the 1990s and early 2000s the political subjectivity to the East of Europe became one of dark ironic cynicism. We will be finding traces of this development throughout multiple projects sharing this existential inclination, both presented below and not included.

Form Art (Alexei Shulgin, 1997) in part was a response to the new HTML standard by the World Wide Web Consortium, which included “Form” components that allowed for basic interaction, i.e. submitting data to the server. These all start, when writing html, with the <form> element: buttons and radio buttons, fieldsets, text areas, check boxes. At the time of its creation in Budapest’s C3, *Form Art* was partially a parody of this early interactivity. It also took stock of and utilised other, more habitual elements of HTML, such as scrolls, and, by thorough estrangement of the HTML form, it attempted to create a fresh language.

Exploring the full range of “form” elements, the title *Form Art* itself performs multiple tricks. First, it is a direct reference to the technical standard that is systematically explored. “Form” is also a loaded term in the history of art. Varvara Stepanova wrote, in 1921, that the fast developing technological world in the conditions of revolution could not expect art to generate canonical forms. The problem of form was moving outside of the realm of art, and the whole aesthetic approach to solving the problems of form was nothing but atavistic. Constructivism appraised the material foundations of form, but it also discredited the form as the focus. What mattered was 1. the object’s production process that gave rise to its form, and 2. the produced object’s principle of use. The form itself, said Stepanova, was to become a principle of continual change. What do we make of these in relation to *Form Art*? The form under exploration in *Form Art* has not come from art, as the objects of Stepanova’s critique. It is a technical standard inherited from the paper office and borne by the capabilities of the scripting language such as HTML. Yet it is the aesthetic form of the new screen, such as the computer screen and the window of the Web browser. In this post constructivist condition of a form borne by the practical use and the larger technical process, what is art’s function, where is art’s work?

Ben Lerner says that the problem of poetry is that people expect too much of poetry and it always falls short of expectations (Lerner, 2016). Poetry inevitably falls short of the impact Plato attributed to it in the *Republic*: a world-transforming impact. Art has a similar problem. *Form Art* a priori falls short of art, of our imagination and expectation of art. Sea waves made of jumping radiobuttons? *Form Art* is a depiction of a dead end in the middle of what we are presented with as the highway into the bright future of collaborative knowledge and creativity. The rupture of absurdism is right here.

Computational culture lacks interesting forms of visibility. The visual form of the advanced technical culture of the 1990s was meagre, today it is not much better. What is the visual language of Facebook, Twitter, Google? Of dull data visualisations? With interesting exceptions, such as in architecture, dance or textiles, new media is still square and it knows it. Hence, it attempts to disappear (become a brain implant, a glass interface), become a frame (ugly VR headset that can’t be seen once it’s on), get out of the focus. Transparency is the aim of new media. How can the art of transparent media possibly look and feel? If the material is invisible or so poor that it is as well as invisible, which forms can we attempt to liberate and for what purpose?

Form Art makes, out of boxes and radiobuttons, of fieldsets and text areas, little human figures, flags, cars, tanks, ships, smoke, snow, tree, dog, cigarette, letters. Why these things? They send us back to bureaucracy, industrial design, factory and office work, the state, the spectacle, “normal life”. It feels like whatever trash is abundant in our visual culture, comes out, because it doesn't find any resistance, anything more

interesting to keep it suppressed. The project estranges the forms but doesn't construct an alternative reality, doesn't make a socio-political proposition. In doing so, its funny side appears very dark. While removing instrumentality, it doesn't give anything worthy in return. Four unfillable textareas make a window? This is despair masked as a joke.

Perhaps it is also a conflict between the childlike drawn figurines, plain pictorial signs, forms stripped to basic geometric abstractions of line or algebraic forms of the table, on one hand, and their relentless power, on the other, that is at the core of this project. Excessive power is absurd. Taking on the powerful is a strong undercurrent in media art which could be described in two ways. One is about anti-art and an ethos of institutional critique, with artists attacking established figures and the idea of hierarchy in art. Eva and Franco Mattes copying and republishing art sites (*Copies*, 1999) in the beginning of their career is a prime example here. The gifted computer programmer, polemic artist and provocative critic of capitalism and fascism, as well as marketer, Netochka Nezvanova managed to become a legend in early net art circles by writing endless poetry / spam entries in mailinglist up to the point of being expelled. While others, such as mez and Igor Stromaier, also created their own net-speak or code-poetry, Netochka's messages – usually a mixture of the Latin alphabet and ASCII signs interspersed with coding – ranged from the cryptic to being illegible, factious and rebellious.

Another line of engagement is a more explicitly politically defined media activist work. Ranging from questions of collective authorship, anonymity and political action under Luther Blisset pseudonym, to the work of Amy Alexander, who wrote software to enable media activists to effectively copy and track amendments to corporate websites, artists and activists intervened in media communications streams, political structures and material cultures to produce alternative narratives, possibilities and realities. Amy Alexander's *CueJack* (1998) was a scanner that, like a camera scanning a QR code today, would lead to a webpage with truthful information about the product's origin and production process. Her software was used by the Yes Men to create a fake website of GATT (now World Trade Organisation) (2000), which looked like the original website but hosted revealing information about WTO's activity. This was prior to the rule of Google, which meant that a "corrected" website was not only findable but could on occasion be displayed as top search result and users could locate get-in-touch email without having looked at the site's content. Indeed, one of its unintended consequences was The Yes Men starting to receive invitations to speak at conferences and to the media as representatives of WTO. They thoroughly employed classical absurdity in their presentations, hoping to shock conference participants and cause media storms. A prank at the "Textiles of the Future" Conference in Tampere, Finland (2003), for instance, featured calculations of affordability of slave-keeping versus outsourcing labour to the Global South as well as the speaker removing his suit and revealing a golden bodycon overall with a body length inflatable phallus / interface device to control remote workers. Not that it really shocked anyone.

Absurdism, which acquired new tastes and scale of visibility with new media, was an effective political tool throughout the 1990s and 2000s and also generated a number of viral and notable aesthetic events, from surfing clubs to cultures of web design (YTMNG), culminating in memes. It was then weaponised by the corporate capitalists as well as the alt-right, especially in the wake of the campaign for Trump's presidency.

The incongruity at the basis of new media absurdism, coupled with nihilism, proved not to be immune to the exploitation by white supremacism. These groups learned to utilise estrangement, experimentation with form and construction and other aesthetic devices of counter-culture very well.

Work by The Yes Men rests on a long tradition of culture jamming and political disobedience that takes on the absurd to enable non-violent protest and oppose the no-escape/no future narrative propelled by the status quo. If we indeed, as Mark Fisher reported, find it harder to imagine an end to capitalism than an end to life, isn't it thoroughly absurd? With capitalism graduating into the order of life itself, twentieth century metaphysical absurdism, including existentialism, takes on a new meaning. Camus framed it as, "[the] divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, [which] truly constitutes the feeling of Absurdity" (Camus, 1942). The discord of human life composed of impossibility, irresolvability, disadjustment, misalignment, slow and fast violence and endless destruction is a transcendental expansion on the much earlier ontological ordering devices of the carnivalesque that historically underpinned absurdism. The capsizing of the divine or feudal ordering of the carnivalesque gives way to the non-sense of capitalist structuring of the unipolar world without alternatives - *an absurd world*.

Systems and Infrastructures

The question of the form in relation to politics, one of the core themes of twentieth century art, as we have seen, takes on new and multiple meanings in new media art. Not only a question of direct action and intervention, or appropriation and counter-attack, the destabilisation of art institutions, anti-art, non-art, and automated curating, it also concerns itself with computational forms, such as databases or machine learning models, and cloud infrastructures, investigating politics and aesthetics of expanded computational systems. *Absurdism here can be used as a method or arise as an effect of human-computer interactions*. At times embraced as a preferred aesthetic, it often takes on a capacity to frame or otherwise systematise a complex set of affairs.

Digital media art not only queried art systems and computational infrastructures, but also created them. The irregularity of new media art was maintained by a consistent line of work aimed at creating platforms and drawing in people and projects from the outside of the field of art. Exemplified by *Refresh* (1996), a deceased project which consisted of pages distributed between geographically dispersed organisations and their servers and the *First Cyberfeminist International* platform organised by the *Old Boys Network* as part of Documenta X (1997), new media art developed infrastructures with a view for inclusion of large amount of voices. Part of this movement was reconceptualising non-art as art. Runme.org software art repository featured a "digital folk and artisanship" category, hosting a number of "objet trouve" projects fished for in the debris of networks. Such folklore was exemplified by anonymous software ephemera, such as viruslike minor prank programs of the 1990s, Easter eggs, various ASCII art traditions, hackers' "canon" of pranks and cool things.

WinGluk Builder by an anonymous author, for instance, is a collection of pseudoviruses and a tool for building them. The project is representative of the cracker culture of "revenge software" that produces the impression that the computer is affected by a virus. Running the program would crumble the icons or make the screen blink in every colour it can produce. But as an ironic metacommentary on the all-powerful

cracker culture, *Win-Gluk Builder* is also a program for custom making such “viruses” for users’ own disposal via specifying, through a menu, the effects one wants to produce and simply pressing the “generate” button. The project also makes fun of the Windows-like standard application interface that, coupled with a mockery of functionality, makes aesthetic interventions into software design and functionality from niches buried deep in the “dark” Web.

Another example is *Tempest for Eliza* by Eric Thiele. *Tempest for Eliza* is a computer program that uses the capacity of a cathode-ray tube computer monitor to send out AM radio signals to transmit a piece of music. Any cathode-ray computer monitor was constantly sending out high frequency electromagnetic waves that could be caught by short wave AM radio. Thiele wrote a program that displayed such images on the monitor’s screen (black and white stripes) that translated into the waves of *Fur Elise* by Beethoven, which can be caught and played by a radio put nearby. The program is a “proof” of the possibility to spy on computer users from a distance. The *Tempest* was exhibited, among others, at one of the *Readme* software art festivals, in Helsinki. It was an absurd sight. The transformation of the monitor designed for visual display onto the radio emitting station designed for the ear was crowned with Beethoven’s classical melody performed in low-tech, crackly way. There was nothing else, but black and white lines, transmitting one of the most recognisable melodies of romantic music. The absurdist incongruity between the basic geometry of blocks displayed on the screen and the romantic melody perceived by ear underlined the sheer rapacity of technology that could be processing anything at all but would still look like a bunch of black and white stripes.

Erica Scourti has become known for her performative projects based on her online life, which include prodding and pushing software systems and their analytical capacities, such as predictive computing. From asking a ghost-writer to write her biography based on her online traces in social media, e-mail accounts and search history (*The Outage*, 2014) to collating fragments (from her online archive parsed by algorithms or semi-automated editing systems) and commissioning others to imagine the missing links to create short stories about her life (*Dark Archives*, 2015), Scourti staged process-led scenarios in which human and computer intermingle and form a collaborative authorship, and where it is never fully clear who the actor is and what is influenced by whom. Scourti’s emphasis on automation and machine learning in meaning-making is visible in *Slip Tongue*, 2018 which is structured around snippets of personal exchanges with friends and family which are edited and read randomly by a voice imitation algorithm. Scourti works with predictive text or image sorting and recognition systems, but every time the result has a haunting sense of absurdism about it. Countering the presumed clarity and objectivity technology, Scourti emphasizes the fragmentation, noise, and slack performance of computational processes. While exhibiting a profound interest in the working of computational infrastructures, she never lets them remain abstract. Operating in this mix of her own experiences and (digital) memorabilia with abstract computer protocols that are unstable and liable to fail, her performances unfold to become—with time—increasingly absurd.

In *Life in AdWords* (2012–2013), Scourti e-mailed her diary to herself via her Gmail account, and each day read aloud, in front of a webcam, the keywords that Google came up with. The length of time—nearly a year—of such daily performances gives them an emotional and poetic quality that is stoic, ironic and absurd. Using her

private everyday self as a site for artistic experimentation and expression, Scourti takes pleasure in the confusion of boundaries, whether it is of language and fiction or body and identity. While never really sure where the artistic and the private life begin or end, Scourti's semi-autobiographical poetic gestures can seem compulsive in the social media machine of self-branding. This is not only true for herself, but also for her friends and family, whose personal exchanges can become part of her work. It could be argued that these tactics merely play into the mechanisms of neoliberal capitalism and thus reinforce the power dynamics at play. While being very aware of these implications, Scourti shows how, by an intensive scrutiny of different roles and functions and by the application of tactics of exaggeration and extreme appropriation, dealing with the rules can actually empower. Her method is strategic: by using technical translations and filling the gaps with fiction, fragments of videos, photos or drawings, she enacts an absurdist aesthetics which emphasises the sociopolitical implications of personal data being filtered, analysed, fed forward and backward propagated. Performing with the algorithms, bots and other automated intelligent systems in an absurdist way ultimately underlines *the absurdism of big data promises and the absurd lure of artificial intelligence*.

Why not begin a countermove by setting up your own big tech company *DullTech*TM (2015)? Constant Dullaart is known for his exploration and subversion of the web as a medium of communication and distribution, in particular in relation to its technological and socio-political constraints and affordances. While playing with his often misspelled or misunderstood, Dutch family name Dullaart, which is not a portmanteau (i.e., constant dull art), he manages to bring dullness to the next level. Dullaart embraces and enacts the Dull as a performative act in the form of a real-world start-up *DullTech*TM. Both a performance and a genuine hardware start-up *DullTech* created technically simplified—or dull—products, which evolved into *dull.live*TM. *DullTech* is also an “accelerating incubator environment” that serves as a commercial co-working space and a physical platform. Gaining access to, or becoming part of, the corporate tech worlds meant, for Dullaart, operating within their stratification system. This included hanging around trade fairs and chatting on QQ, posing as a businessman while trying to get in touch with producers who were “off their heads with meetings” and finally visiting the factory, figuring out import duties, and designing the products. The brand evolved into *DullCloud*, *DullBrown*, *DullDawn*, *DullSocial*, and *DullDream*, and *dull.life*TM as it continued its metonymic narrative.

Absurd inhabitation of the dominant techno-economic orderings, from the social mingling of the fairs to the bureaucracy of the office, and from the industrial order to inverted libidinal machines, was followed, for Dullaart by other forms of absurdity. With *PhantomLove* (2017) Dullaart turned to poetry and language as a means to disrupt the conventional use of social media platforms, this time targeting Instagram. Although his main criticism was focused on commercialisation and standardisation through aesthetic appropriation and performance, he also directed his attention to the users of these platforms. In a series of five performances, Dullaart uploaded lines of poetry to the Instagram accounts of semi-public organisations. Helped by an “army” of Instagram accounts, several artificially constructed identities were made to recite the poems. Each account delivered one line in turn as comments to a posted image.

Phantom Love amplified several questionable Instagram accounts: the public organisations of the EU Council, US Customs Border Protection, Historic Greenwood Cemetery, Department of Homeland Security, and the Internet Society, an American non-profit that provides leadership in Internet-related standards, education, access and policy. All of them seemed to seek validation from their “audience” via their Instagram accounts. The fictitious accounts were used as new tools and actors for communication, albeit in ambiguous and disconcerting ways. At first sight the comments seemed random, nonsensical and trivial. For example, the first two comments responding to an image posted by the Department of Homeland Security resembled regular responses, a critical and a positive reflection on the initial post, yet the third comment was more cryptic “cesarsantana420 to know ones way around”, and it was followed by another fifty or so arbitrary sentences. Or so it seemed. Reading one after the other created a strict and consistent pattern. A rhythm emerged and a narrative unfolded.

As Dullaart lets his “forces” recite, the stanza is coloured by either a militant or a techno utopian dimension, and a chorus develops which is at once nonsensical and sensible, social and technical, a prank and a political statement. While the first poems still follow a functional cadence and rhyme, the later ones are increasingly complex: interspersed with additional punctuation marks, abstract symbols and emojis, creating visual patterns as well as signalling the often automated nonsensical response mechanisms on social media, and using words from different languages to create double meanings and confuse: for instance, ‘kind’ (English) and ‘kind’ (Dutch, for a child). To find out what is happening in Dullaart’s poems requires a close reading: who or what is speaking, what or who is spoken about, and how the comments relate to each other and to the main account. In the process, the reader becomes immersed in the intermingled identities and voices; some of them human while others are propelled by technology. Although Dullaart is not interested in writing computer-generated poetry, the technical aspect of word exhibition is nevertheless an important part of the work, and in particular the question of how artificial identities are created and intercepted or not, and thus affect the meaning and context of the poem. The material is both tool and content. Indeed, while Dullaart made a strict protocol for the “armies”. What actually happens is that each line needs to be logged manually, and one follows the other after it has been validated. Yet it may happen that the verification comment comes later than expected and someone has already pushed the button twice. So, the same line might appear suddenly in two different accounts. However, inevitably, the rhythm and content will change as identities are unmasked, either because they are discovered as fake or because the owner discovers that her account is used in ways she doesn’t like. The latter, also known as a “stealth account”, emphasises how identity is often not clear and can be used in ambiguous ways. Similarly, in *Phantom Love* the distinction between real and fake accounts is not straightforward: while Dullaart instigated the process, the technical machine performs—or conducts—the outcome, at times interrupted by human input. Moreover, the poems were released anonymously, and although one is signed at the bottom and Dullaart revealed his authorship after a while, most users will likely have been puzzled as to what happened: are the poems idiocy, a critique or a praise? The regularity of the stanzas and the irregularity of the words and symbols, the formal instruction versus the mechanical randomness, and the ambiguous use of identities, infused by computational processes, make the poems expand beyond themselves, creating multiple readings and understandings.

By undermining the fundamental structures of the platform and subverting the like economy through the practice of commenting, Dullaart manages to create confusion, if only for an “Instagram moment”. That these moments don’t last is not lost on Dullaart. The domain name <http://www.attention.rip/> and the tag #attentionrip are the preambles for the day the predictable will happen: the accounts will be identified and subsequently shut down. In an attempt to save the performance Dullaart recorded the entries via webrecorder.io where they can be read in full, albeit the immediate surprise of the sudden encounter (in many accounts one post is liked many times more than others) and thus its tactical appeal is lost. Without expectations, Dullaart’s poetry alienates its form, the context in which it performs, interweaving and estranging the technical, human and the social media platform. The alienation is where absurdism is resurrected.

Systems, whether seemingly natural, such as language, or ostensibly hierarchical, such as “the art world”, orderly, such as bureaucracy, or messy but often working, such as image recognition software, and infrastructures, including global distribution of goods or labour, cloud computing, as well as forces and movements, of capital and political power, are difficult to take on. As it is often not possible to meaningfully step outside of them, taking on systems and infrastructures has to rely, at least partially, but inescapably, on formulations and enactments on their own terms. Similarly to how language delimits expressability, and objections to language are formulated in language, disturbance comes from within. *The moment of the absurd is the breaking down of completeness, success, and seamless capture.* Goedel’s theorems of incompleteness, proving that any formal consistent system will always have statements unprovable within the system, led to Alan Turing’s exploration of the halting problem, which he solved with the invention of the Turing machine—the foundation of today’s computer. *What if the rupture and incongruence of absurdity is at the heart of the digital machine?*

Instead of a Conclusion

What digital media absurdism does to twentieth century absurd is to broaden it, simultaneously abstract and materialise it, globalise it, make it a platform, and dehumanise it. Twentieth century absurdism was partially rooted in the anguish of humanism and the realisation of its limits, the collapse of the subject and the focus on the materialist forces of transformation. As the notions of the worthy subjects are expanded, through struggle, to include non-male, non-white, non-human, the logic of the absurd widens. The absurd concerns meaning and evolution; cells, immune systems and colonialism; bodies, affect and algorithms; violence and global infrastructures. Hence, the absurd is not pinned on a “versus”: humans vs technology, sense vs code, irrationality vs instrumentality, but on incongruities of a “within”.

Digital media and its computational processes affect lived time and reconfigure space. Digital mediation allows for zooming in on miniscule ruptures as well as zooming out to joined calculative efforts. The digital scales very well. It has the capacity to intervene before one’s consciousness can register it as well as drive one insane by service requests. It is the technology of the affect. It is the renewed constructor of race. It is the logic of governance. It is in our bodies. It can operate globally in the cloud, solving problems and creating problems. It is the future of intelligence and war. It is a new instrument through which everything looks to be made differently.

The digital absurd is the distance, discord and incongruity that appear through the new look, everywhere you look. The digital media absurd utilises and builds on the devices employed by the absurd before it: sarcasm and parody, jester performance and trickstery, nihilism and ache, illogical sequences of actions/narrations/images, clashing registers of knowledge, breakages, context swap, shock, but it also develops new forms for the absurd. These include the total archiving and the madness of data, technological infrastructure as a failing artistic material, despair of form, kidnapping content, and many other.

We have not mentioned even one per cent of projects warranting inclusion here. We could have written about the dadaistic, vanishing digital in the *Museum of Ordure* (Geoff Cox, Stuart Brisley and Adrian Ward, 2001). More could have been said about the absurdity of automation, both in terms of identity (Cornelia Sollfrank, *Female Extension*, 1998) and infrastructural form (Jodi, *Geo Goo*, 2008; Igor Stromajer, *101 algorithmic computer-generated pseudo-poems*, 2020; Matthew Plummer-Fernandez, *Novice Art Blogger*, 2015). We have deleted a whole section on database absurdity as the essay got too long (Olia Lialina, *Myboyfriendcamebackfromthewar*, 1997 and Sakrowski, *Curating YouTube* 2010). Very little was said on absurdity as trickstery and parody (Janus Janus Janus; etoy; Ubermorgen). Many more examples of alternative art organisations and platforms could have been included (F.A.T. Lab, Van Gogh TV and others) as well as interventions into corporate giants and new machine learning systems (Aaron Koblin, *The Sheep Market*, 2008). Performances of idiocy and absurdist interventions into software systems such as social media, maps and video hosting platforms could be further investigated (Petra Cortright, *vvebcam* (2007); Rosie Gibbens, *Microperformances*, 2021; Ogmeos, *School of Zen Motoring*, 2020). Complex investigations of systems, including ecological, mystical, political, sexual and their intertwinement with the digital warranted a section (work by Heath Bunting, Martin Howse, Shu Lea Cheang). However, having reached the word limit, we have to stop writing. After all, isn't it absurd to write about the absurd?

References

- Bakhtin, Mikhail. *On Formal Method in Literary Scholarship* (Baltimore, John Hopkins University Press, 1991).
- Camus, Albert. "The Myth of Sisyphus", 1942.
<https://www2.hawaii.edu/~freeman/courses/phil360/16.%20Myth%20of%20Sisypus.pdf>
- Bergson, Henri. "Laughter: an Essay on the Meaning of Comic" (1914).
<http://www.authorama.com/laughter-6.html>
- Husserl, Edmund. *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology* (Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 1970).
- Lerner, Ben. *The Hatred of Poetry* (London, Fitzcarraldo Editions, 2016)
- Nakamura, Lisa. *Digitizing Race. Visual Cultures of the Internet* (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2007).

Massumi, Brian. *Parables for the Virtual. Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002).