

# **Specta(c)torship in Net Art(?): Individuation After Simondon**

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## Abstract

*Specta(c)torship in Net Art(?)*: *Individuation After Simondon* is an experiment at the fringes of academic writing. It draws on a selected corpus of net art(?) works in order to question the experience of embodied subjectivity which coagulates in the context of contemporary internet technology, but also in order to ask: how is it possible to write about this experience in the first place? The embodied process of specta(c)torship can coagulate in writing only as a symptom of its failure and, in order to attend to that which comes to writing from outside representation (and that writing can never fully capture), it is necessary to experiment with the limits of written language.

The book contends that net art(?) specta(c)torship, instead of being an encounter between a predefined subject (the spectator) and a predefined object (the artwork), rather constitutes a process of individuation through which the embodied thinking subject is constructed and deconstructed at the very same time. The text critically engages with Gilbert Simondon's theory of individuation proposing that, in order to account for the emergence of identity (a is a, a = a), the ontogenetic problematic outlined by Simondon (the *becoming* of *being*) has to be complemented by a phenomenogenetic one: the question of genesis of phenomena (i.e. the genesis of specific ways in which phenomena emerge). Upon this background, the process of specta(c)torship is understood as the problematization of the conjunction between the ontogenetic and phenomenogenetic dimensions of individuation. The specificity of net art(?) specta(c)torship rests upon the type of embodied subjectivity that is problematized and (de)constructed in this process, namely a particular instantiation of the modern 'human' subject contingent on the functioning of contemporary digital objects (the <strike>human</strike> spectator). At the same time, as a consequence of the ontogenetic/phenomenogenetic conjunction, the specific problematic that drives and is driven by net art(?) specta(c)torship (the (de)construction of the <strike>human</strike>

embodied subject) is folded back into ontogenesis as the (lack of) origin that grounds the ontogenetic dynamic.

The key for understanding processes of specta(c)torship in this sense is the problematic of phenomenogenesis. Yet, while a theory of phenomenogenesis is stringently necessary, nonetheless, at the same time, phenomenogenesis is from the very beginning a fundamentally self-contradictory concept. Rather than a rigorous philosophical text with a claim to Truth, this book will remain then an experimental fiction, erring in search of the meaning of embodied subjectivity in the context of contemporary digital cultures.

*La recherche serait donc de la même sorte que l'erreur. Errer, c'est tourner  
et retourner, s'abandonner à la magie du détour.*

— Maurice Blanchot, *L'Entretien Infini*

The research will therefore be akin to error. To err is to turn and to return, to  
give oneself up to the magic of detour. [my translation]

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## Introduction: (Dis)orientation

A flashback to an ancient Chinese story:

Whenever Bo Ya played the lute, Zhong Ziqi would listen to him. Once when he was playing the lute, his thoughts turned to Mount Tai. Zhong Ziqi said, “How splendidly you play the lute! Lofty and majestic like Mount Tai.” A short time later, when his thoughts turned to rolling waters, Zhong Ziqi said, “How splendidly you play the lute! Rolling and swelling like a rushing river.” When Zhong Ziqi died, Bo Ya smashed the lute and cut its strings. To the end of his life, he never played the lute again because he felt that there was no one in the world worth playing for. (*The Annals of Lü Buwei* [3rd century BC] 2000, 308)<sup>1</sup>

Specta(c)torship.

in net art(?):

(an art(?)work of sorts, a list of 'rotting' links, a digital ruin in the making)

*100.000.000 Stolen Pixels* (2010) by Kim Asendorf on [runme.org](http://runme.org). <http://runme.org/project/+100-000-000/>

*Abstract Browsing* (2014) by Rafaël Rozendaal. <http://www.abstractbrowsing.net>.

*After Hours* (2019) by Tina Willgren. <http://www.tinawillgren.com/index.php?/works/after-hours/>

*Atlas of Female Anatomy* (2017) by Pita Arreola, can be downloaded from Off Site Project's

[\[\[\[\[\[\[\[\[ZIP\]\]\]\]\]\]\]\]](http://www.offsiteproject.org/ZIP) exhibition. <http://www.offsiteproject.org/ZIP>.

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<sup>1</sup> Several versions of this myth exist in ancient Chinese texts, the one presented here appears in *The Annals of Lü Buwei*, a 3rd century B.C. compendium of previous philosophical thought concerned with political issues.

*Blind Spot* (2007) by Miao Ying in [rhizome.org's Net Art Anthology](https://anthology.rhizome.org/blind-spot). <https://anthology.rhizome.org/blind-spot>.

*Death Has a Small Voice* (2019) by Alex Myers. <https://theportlounge.wixsite.com/entrance/copy-of-home-1>.

*Form Art* (1997) by Alexei Shulgin, archived on the C<sup>3</sup> Center for Culture & Communication Foundation website. <http://www.c3.hu/collection/form/>.

*From the Margins* (2018) by Andrew Marsh, can be downloaded from Off Site Project's [\[\[\[\[\[\[\[\[ZIP\]\]\]\]\]\]\]\]](http://www.offsiteproject.org/ZIP) exhibition. <http://www.offsiteproject.org/ZIP>.

*IFSR (I feel so relaxed)* (2019) by George Jasper Stone and Suzannah Pettigrew, with soundscape by cktrl. <https://specter.world/Cleanse>.

*It is as if you were doing work* (2017) by Pippin Barr. <https://www.pippinbarr.com/games/2017/07/03/it-is-as-if-you-were-doing-work.html>.

*Genesis* (1999) by Eduardo Kac. <http://www.ekac.org/geninfo.html>.

*The Ladder* (2017) by Yorgos Papafigos. <https://hysterophimia.net/yorgos-papafigos/> or <https://yorgospapafigos.com/The-ladder> (info and images of the work on artist's website).

*Last Real Net Art Museum* (n.d.) by Olia Lialina et al. <http://myboyfriendcamebackfromth.ewar.ru>

*Let's Play: Ancient Greek Punishment* (2011, 2016) by Pippin Barr. <https://www.pippinbarr.com/2016/06/21/lets-play-ancient-greek-punishment-limited-edition/>.

*Mezangelle* (1994 - ongoing) by Mez Breeze in [rhizome.org's Net Art Anthology](https://anthology.rhizome.org/mez-breeze). <https://anthology.rhizome.org/mez-breeze>.

*My Boyfriend Came Back From the War* (1996) by Olia Lialina. <http://www.teleportacia.org/war/>.

*Naked on Pluto* (2010-2013) by Dave Griffiths, Aymeric Mansoux and Marloes de Valk on [runme.org](http://runme.org). <http://runme.org/project/+naked-on-pluto/>.

*The Node* (n.d.) by Noviki. <https://specter.world/Ground>.

*Permanent Redirect* (2018) by Donald Hanson. <https://permanent-redirect.xyz>.

*the revolving internet* (2012) by Constant Dullaart. <http://therevolvinginternet.com/>.

*The Revolving Internet Counterclockwise* (2013) by Alain Barthélémy. <http://therevolvinginternetccw.alainbarthelemy.com/>.

*Riot* (1999) by Mark Napier. <http://potatoland.org/riot/>.

[runme.org](http://runme.org) (2003-ongoing), by Alexei Shulgin, Olga Goriunova, Amy Alexander, Alex McLean, et. al.

*Seances* (2016) by Guy Maddin, Evan Johnson, Galen Johnson and the National Film Board of Canada. <http://seances.nfb.ca>.



*Tempest for Eliza* (2001) by Erik Thiele on [runme.org](http://runme.org). <http://runme.org/feature/read/+tempest/+52/>.

*sorry to dump on you like this.zip* (2015). Artwork by Christopher Clary, can be downloaded from [rhizome.org](https://rhizome.org)'s exhibition *The Download*. <https://rhizome.org/download/#works>.

*to oblivion.zip* (2017) by Sheida Soleimani, can be downloaded from [rhizome.org](https://rhizome.org)'s exhibition *The Download*. <https://rhizome.org/download/#works>.

*We See in Every Direction* (2013) by Jonas Lund's. <http://ineverydirection.net>; <https://jonaslund.com/works/we-see-in-every-direction/>.

*The Web Stalker* (1997-1998) by I/O/D (Matthew Fuller, Colin Green, Simon Pope), in Rhizome's *Net Art Anthology*. <http://archive.rhizome.org/anthology/webstalker.html>.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> There is no shortcut to specta(c)torship, and there is no beginning. One always has to start in the middle, disoriented. I invite the reader to take the time to engage with this list in detail, to follow the links in those cases where it is still possible, and to consider what is lost in those cases where the links fail.

The following pages are traces of processes of specta(c)torship afforded by the encounters with the art(?)works listed here. Yet these traces lead nowhere. Certainly I do not pretend that they reveal the intentions of the artists. Certainly I do not pretend that they reveal the works themselves. With respect to the art(?)works specta(c)torship is a betrayal: (erratically) following impulses inherent in the encounters with the works, away from the works themselves, never quite grasping them. What is at stake in specta(c)torship is not formulating a judgement (aesthetic or otherwise) about the art(?)work, but attending to the ways in which the art(?)work modulates the (de)construction of embodied subjectivity and of its world. If you want to know anything about the art(?)works, there is no other way than taking the time of engaging directly with them. This text will not help in this sense, it will not make the works any easier to understand, or to approach. If anything, in a parasitic gesture, it will complicate the work of the art(?)work rather than simplifying it. These written traces do not claim to lead to general philosophical truths either. The miso-sophical fabulations inscribed here are merely situated consequences of an embodied encounter with these works. They are localized errors dependent both on the works and on the embodied subjectivity (de)constructed in the processes of specta(c)torship that they afford. All this remains a (dis)orienting erring, never quite firmly establishing its ground, or, more exactly, the ground (embodied subjectivity in interrelation with its world) shifts in the very process of its establishment.

Footnote to footnote 2: This is also the reason why it would be misleading to claim to offer an orientation for the reader in terms of a narrative account of my identity. The position from which I(?) write (undoubtedly shaped by racial biases, gender and sexuality biases, class biases, ability biases, etc.) is (de)constructed in the very process of writing. The best account of this position is the text itself, that participates in its de-construction, and not a simplified narrative autobiography.

## Introduction: (Dis)orientation (Retake)

A flashback to an ancient Chinese story:

Whenever Bo Ya played the lute, Zhong Ziqi would listen to him. Once when he was playing the lute, his thoughts turned to Mount Tai. Zhong Ziqi said, “How splendidly you play the lute! Lofty and majestic like Mount Tai.” A short time later, when his thoughts turned to rolling waters, Zhong Ziqi said, “How splendidly you play the lute! Rolling and swelling like a rushing river.” When Zhong Ziqi died, Bo Ya smashed the lute and cut its strings. To the end of his life, he never played the lute again because he felt that there was no one in the world worth playing for. (*The Annals of Lü Buwei* [3rd century BC] 2000, 308)<sup>3</sup>

At first, this seems to be the story of a skillful musician, Bo Ya, who manages to recreate for the spectator, through his music, the loftiness of Mount Tai, or the unruly energy of a rushing river. Yet, as we get to the last lines, we realize that Bo Ya’s skill (art) is dependent on that of the spectator. Without Zhong Ziqi, the art(?)work, the music produced by Bo Ya, cannot do its work. The *qin* (lute) is as good as mute: ‘When Zhong Ziqi died, Bo Ya smashed the lute and cut its strings’. The process of reception plays an integral part in the being and becoming of the art(?)work. The art(?)work is never complete in itself, it exists only in resonance with the spectator. Specta(c)torship: actively

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<sup>3</sup> Several versions of this myth exist in ancient Chinese texts, the one quoted here appears in *The Annals of Lü Buwei*, a 3rd century B.C. compendium of previous philosophical thought concerned with political issues.

making oneself the patient, the recipient, the resonator for the intensive impulses offered by the art(?)work.<sup>4</sup>

In the framework that I will propose here, this anecdote reads as an affirmation of the creative power of active/passive specta(c)torship: opening oneself up to the work of the art(?)work and following the impulses that emerge in this process. Music happens, art(?) happens, only when one is capable of letting go of oneself to the point that the music (the art(?)work) can create the lofty mountain and the rushing river in the space opened by the deterritorialization of the self. Reading against the grain of the story, I do not see specta(c)torship as a way of witnessing the intentions of the author, but rather as the opening of an unknown that exceeds both the author and the spectator. I read the lofty mountain and the rushing river, not as sensorial representations evoked by the art(?)work, but rather as figures that approximate an intensive space of becoming which exceeds all representation. Specta(c)torship is this process in which embodied subjects (de)construct themselves so that an unsettling corporeality is affirmed, a corporeality that cannot be explained anymore as a relationship between individual 'human' subjects and art(?)works that mediate between them.

With the death of Zhong Ziqi—the individual that is ready to leave itself behind and open in non-action towards the process of specta(c)torship—the art(?)work collapses, it cannot perform its work, it cannot find the emptiness that could bring it into being. What dies with Zhong Ziqi is the process of specta(c)torship, but also, importantly, in *The Annals of Lü Buwei*, the potentiality of appropriate

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<sup>4</sup> One of the central claims of this book is that, in order to think spectatorship rigorously (and especially in relation to net art(?)), our fundamental assumptions about what spectatorship is need to be reconceived. I am thus introducing the slightly awkward spelling specta(c)torship. The full significance of this will only become apparent later on in *Chapter V*. Some preliminary (dis)orienting remarks regarding this term can be found under the subheading 3. *Specta(c)torship of the Introduction*.

political action. The main point of the story, in the context of this ancient political text, is that good government relies on a synergy between the worthy advisor and the political ruler: good advice is useless when political power is not ready to receive it in passive-active non-action. If there is no one able to listen, then the *qin*<sup>5</sup> is as good as mute. It is a simple and quite obvious point, really. But then again, more than two millennia later there is a feeling that we are still missing it. How would this political insight translate to the contemporary context of globalized technologically mediated networks of power? The question goes now beyond the relationship between the worthy advisor and the ruler, to bear on micro-power relations that define all the individuals immersed in these networks. What would it mean, then, to be able to listen, to open oneself to the risks of specta(c)torship in the context of contemporary digital cultures? And, what would be the stakes of such a gesture?

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<sup>5</sup> *Qin* is translated in the fragment above—following a well established convention—as *lute* in order to facilitate the comprehension for the western audience, although strictly speaking the *qin* does not have much to do with a *lute*. The translation of *qin* as *lute* is just another instance that shows how deaf we are to the nuances of non-western cultures, how unready to listen, how unready to perform the role of spectators.

We will turn in this project towards the fringes of digital cultures, engaging with a selected corpus of net art<sup>(?)</sup> works, in order to delve into this problematic and to unpack its implications from a speculative philo-sophical/miso-sophical perspective.<sup>6</sup>

### **(a parenthetical piece for unfinished digital piano**

The sense of these pages does not simply rely on sequences of words, but, more importantly, on the trajectories, allowed or imposed, in the spaces between them. These politically charged trajectories are often rigidified, naturalized and ignored. In speech it is in such infrathin<sup>7</sup> spaces between words that language is (at times) bare breath, with all the intricate ethical implications that follow. These written pages are likewise punctuated by the blank spaces in-between words, and would make little

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## **6 Introduction: Orientation**

For those unfamiliar with net art<sup>(?)</sup>, I recommend taking here a detour through the open access online course *Net Art: A Problematic Introduction*, that I have developed in collaboration with musician and artist Darie Nemeş Bota. The course aims at familiarizing readers without prior knowledge of art history and art theory with the field of net art<sup>(?)</sup>, some of the main theoretical problems associated with it, but also to raise stringent questions regarding life in contemporary digital cultures through the lens of net art<sup>(?)</sup> works. *Net Art: A Problematic Introduction* can be accessed free by signing up at: <https://spectactor.thinkific.com/courses/net-art>.

I will assume in the following pages that the reader has a basic understanding of net art<sup>(?)</sup>.

Footnote to footnote 6: the course *Net Art: A Problematic Introduction* constitutes an integral part of this book, an introductory chapter (located in a footnote).

<sup>7</sup> For the infrathin see Manning 2020, 15-16.

sense without them, yet, no breath flows here to stitch the words together. In an absurd (out of tune), non-sensical gesture, I invite you to get lost in the infinitesimal spaces between these words that were never spoken, twisting the politics that govern the trajectories between them, interrogating the (im)material subjectivities that transpire when we lose the thread in the labyrinthine whiteness of the (digitally mimicked) page.

I propose to use the basic capabilities of your internet browser to sonify the infinitesimal spaces between the words on the following pages. Here is, in general lines, what I will instruct your internet browser to do:

- split from the beginning of the text an 88-character long sequence, regardless of formatting;
- identify the positions of ' ' (spaces) in the sequence;
- for each ' ', generate a sound-wave with a frequency roughly corresponding to the respective position on an 88-key piano;
- the duration of the sound is given by the number of characters that separate the respective ' ' from the previous one;
- the starting moment of the sound is given by the position in the characterSet that I will define of either the character immediately preceding the ' ', or of the one immediately following it;
- repeat until reaching the end of the text;

For the actual implementation of this plan, see at the end of this *Introduction* the portion between the tags `<script>` `</script>`. Paragraphs marked with `'/* ... */'` are comments for the 'human' reader. If you are not familiar with coding in JavaScript and cannot follow the code, going through the comments should still give you a pretty good idea of how this works. I kept the code very simple, an unfinished sketch rather than a polished final product, and avoided the temptation to make the

resulting musical piece actually sound 'good'. I am interested in the absurdity of this piece and of its relation with the text, not in transforming it into an enjoyable moment of entertainment.

*Reading instructions:*

Option I.

I.a. Copy-paste the entire text from to the `<!doctype html>` declaration below up to where this parenthetical piece closes (i.e. the end of the *Introduction*) in a text editor.

I.b. Save as a .html file.

I.c. Open the file with your internet browser.

I.d. Press the 'Start' button.

I.e. Listen. Read.

(Speaking of digital ruins... For how long will this code actually work?)

Option II.

Read through the text here. The main text of the *Introduction* is the one between the `<p`  
`id="mainText">` `<p>` tags (which instruct the browser to consider the entire text below as a single  
paragraph). Pay special attention at the end of the *Introduction* to the text between the tags `<script>`  
`</script>`.

So, here we go:

```
<!doctype html>
```

```
<html>
```

```
<head>
```

```
<meta charset="utf-8">
```



```

<title>a parenthetical piece for unfinished digital piano</title>

</head>

<body>

  <div>

    <button id="start" onclick="generateAudio()">Start</button>

    <h2 id="clape"></h2>

    <p id="mainText">

```

## 1. The Embodied Spectator in Net Art<sup>(?)</sup>

Let us start by noticing that several recent theoretical discourses insist that net art<sup>(?)</sup><sup>8</sup> practices destabilize the ideas of 'work of art' and 'artist', in other words, that net art<sup>(?)</sup> production cannot be understood in terms of clearly defined subjects (artists, authors) that produce well-defined objects (art<sup>(?)</sup>works). Dieter Daniels, for example, talking about early net art<sup>(?)</sup> practice and its modernist roots, writes :

[E]arly Net-based art sought to overthrow and discredit [“art for art’s sake” autonomy] in favor of a supra-individual, discursive, processual, networked, collective art that, like

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<sup>8</sup> For the sake of consistency, I will be using 'net art<sup>(?)</sup>' throughout this text to refer to relevant practices, even when it is not the term preferred by the artists, critics, or theoreticians with which I am engaging. The exceptions are direct quotations, where I reproduce the original text without any interventions. The same is the case for 'art<sup>(?)</sup>', 'specta(c)torship', and later on '<strike>human</strike>'.

Discussion of the terminology, including the explanation of the superscripted parenthetical question mark of 'net art<sup>(?)</sup>' follows shortly.

the notions of “meta-design” or “social sculpture”, was not representable in the form of a simple, stable “work of art” (Daniels 2009, 29).<sup>9</sup>

Daniels is hence proposing that net art(?)works are not clearly defined objects, but instead ongoing processes with supra-individual, networked, collective aspects. In a similar vein, Robert Sakrowski proposes to use the term 'Net art activity' in order to emphasize the inherent performativity of net art(?) works (Sakrowski 2009, 209, 213). For Sakrowski:

Net art activity is a composite phenomenon consisting of Net conditions (bandwidth and protocols), hardware conditions (computer, monitors, etc.), and software (server, script interpreter, etc.); furthermore it is based on dynamic exchange—on sharing—and hence on participation. It is essentially active, caught up in the process of (technological and social) exchange, and only materializes under specific Net conditions. A final and particular feature of Net art activity is that, in the process of its performance, it shares or is shared and multiplies, and because of its inherent presentational form, (i.e. the Net itself), it is always contextually enacted. (Sakrowski 2009, 216)

Consequently, 'Net art activity' challenges the institutional understanding of the art(?)work and of the artist as the sole producer of the work (Sakrowski 2009, 217).<sup>10</sup> Likewise, Ceci Moss, introduces the term 'expanded internet art' to refer to a practice that critically engages with the 'informational milieu', a practice that is more concerned with the affordances of informational networks and the

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<sup>9</sup> Daniels contends that subsequent generations of net-artists partially returned to a notion of the 'artwork' (Daniels 2009, 30, 38-43).

<sup>10</sup> Sakrowski extends the concept of 'Net art activity' beyond what Daniels discusses as the first generation of net artists (in the chronological terms set up by Daniels, that is beyond the mid '90s).

flow of information than with producing stable, definitive objects (Moss 2019, 3-4, 9-10).

Meanwhile, Ramzi Turki, from a different theoretical perspective, reflects on the gesture of sharing on Facebook as net art<sup>(?)</sup> practice, contending that, because of the interactivity inherent in such practice, the work becomes an immaterial technological 'condition' (Turki 2019, 32-35) for a specific type of relational aesthetics (Turki 2019, 87-91)—a situation that destabilizes the common understanding of the art<sup>(?)</sup>work as well as the figure of the author (Turki 2019, 91).

Whereas such attempts at fundamentally rethinking the net art<sup>(?)</sup> work<sup>11</sup> and the related question of authorship in net art<sup>(?)</sup> are relatively abundant, the figure of the spectator is rarely problematized.

What I mean is not that the process of specta(c)torship is not addressed in the literature on net art<sup>(?)</sup>, but rather that whenever it is addressed there are fundamental assumptions about the being and becoming of the embodied spectator that are left unquestioned.

For example, in an in-depth study of specta(c)torship in net art<sup>(?)</sup>, Michele White argues that a critical discourse about internet and digital technologies has to engage with the constraints that these technologies impose upon the bodies of the spectators (users, workers, but also programmers in White's understanding), and also with the biased narratives of empowerment that are intrinsic to the production of our embodied identities with respect to these technologies (White 2006, 177-178,

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<sup>11</sup> Rethinking the art<sup>(?)</sup> work and the question of authorship is far from being a problematic confined to net art<sup>(?)</sup>. Quite on the contrary, it is consistent with larger theoretical debates that reconsider the status of the art<sup>(?)</sup>work in contemporary artistic practice. Nicolas Bourriaud, for example, contends that in relational aesthetics the art<sup>(?)</sup>work is a social interstice (Bourriaud 2002); Claire Bishop, referring to participatory art, argues that 'the work of art as a finite, portable, commodifiable product is reconceived as an ongoing or long-term *project* with an unclear beginning and end' (Bishop 2012, 2); and David Joselit proposes the concept of 'format' in order to theorize a shift from an object-based aesthetics to 'a network aesthetics premised on the emergence of form from populations of images' (Joselit 2013, 43-55).

194-197). Nonetheless, despite acknowledging that technology participates in the production of embodied subjectivity, White maintains a clear distinction between the body of the spectator and the technological network in order to avoid the danger of collapsing physical bodies in a fantasy of virtuality (that is, in order to avoid the confusion between the 'human' body in its materiality and technologically mediated representations). For White, spatial metaphors (for example presenting the computer screen as a 'window' into the virtual world, conceptualizing activity on the internet as 'surfing', etc.) provide a false promise of liberating the body by obscuring the distinction between on-screen representation and the 'real' body of the spectator placed in front of the screen (White 2006, 17-34). The critical task, then, for White's project is to reinstate the priority and specificity of the biological body and of its needs. This position is consistent with the common sense understanding of specta(c)torship as a relation between an embodied subject that exists in itself and an object/process exterior to the subject: the art(?)work. The interaction with the work is seen as a set of impulses that are, strictly speaking, extrinsic to the embodied subject and model the body (or are inscribed on it) from its outside.<sup>12</sup>

Ramzi Turki is also addressing the peculiarities of the position of the spectator in net art(?), focusing especially on the extent to which the spectator becomes an active participant in creating the work (Turki 2019, 92-106). In order to foreground this fundamental change, Turki often prefers the term

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<sup>12</sup> Interestingly, White ends her argument with a nod towards Katherine Hayles' concept of 'mindbody', overtly pointing towards the problematic of embodiment in net art(?) specta(c)torship as ongoing negotiation of a relational field that precedes subjects and objects (White 2006, 197). This is much closer to the perspective that I am exploring in this text.

*inter-acteur* instead of spectator.<sup>13</sup> Yet, Turki too, maintains unquestioned the premise that the spectator/inter-acteur is an independent embodied 'human' subject that relates with exterior objects/ processes (art(?)works). As in White's text, what remains unquestioned is the way in which processes of specta(c)torship participate in the very construction and deconstruction of embodied subjectivity.

The notable exception to this line of discourse is the Simondon-inspired approach of Ceci Moss to 'expanded internet art'. Moss touches on the question of the 'posthuman subject' with respect to the potentialities opened up by the art(?)works (Moss 2019, 134-5), suggesting that the works play an active role in the individuation of embodied subjectivity. Nonetheless, Moss' project primarily deals with artistic practice and the functioning of the art(?)work, and consequently the line of enquiry concerned with the figure of the spectator remains unaddressed in more detail.<sup>14</sup> It is this line of thought, which understands the encounter with net art(?)works as participating in the very constitution of embodied subjectivity, that will be pursued and examined more closely here in the following chapters.

The intention of this project is to explore the problematic of embodiment by following impulses generated in discrete situated encounters with specific net art(?) works. In order to formulate an understanding of specta(c)torship that does not rely on predefined embodied individuals, I will

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<sup>13</sup> I will address separately below, in the section 3. *Specta(c)torship* of the *Introduction*, critical discourses which argue for replacing the concept of 'spectator' with those of 'user', 'interactor' or 'inter-acteur'. In what we are concerned here, these discourses, as well, leave unquestioned the embodied thinking subject engaged in the process of specta(c)torship. What is at stake in these texts is the political position of the spectator formulated in terms of agency and the lack thereof, however fundamental assumptions about embodied subjectivity are taken for granted (see below).

<sup>14</sup> We will return below to a closer read of relevant aspects of Moss' work.

engage in a close reading of Gilbert Simondon's philosophical work, contending that specta(c)torship can be understood as a process of individuation through which the embodied subjectivity of the spectator is both constructed and deconstructed at the same time. I will argue that this (de)construction of embodied subjectivity rests upon the political gesture of opening oneself up as an unanswerable question—opening oneself up beyond one's corporeal subjectivity as it is defined in inter-individual systems of relations.<sup>15</sup> In formulating this argument, we will also encounter Jussi Parikka's understanding of bodies in terms of intensities, assemblages and diagrammatics (Parikka 2010), Bernard Stiegler's insistence that embodied thinking is inherently technological (Stiegler 1998), and Yuk Hui's theory of digital objects as tertiary protentions that are intrinsic to the interplay of mental faculties (Hui 2016). Each time it will be a question of critically engaging with these arguments, twisting and misreading them, rather than simply adopting them as stable truths.

Before delving deeper into the problematic of embodied subjectivity, though, we should first address two key concepts that are essential for this project: *net art*<sup>(?)</sup> and *specta(c)torship*.

## 2. Net Art<sup>(?)</sup>

The choice to use the term 'net art<sup>(?)</sup>' comes against a rather complex terminological dispute in the field. It primarily intends to stress the specific technological networks inherent in the works, and with them the social, economic, political, biological, ecological, etc. networks,<sup>16</sup> while avoiding the implication that the works themselves are 'inside', or a part of, the internet.<sup>17</sup> The technical

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<sup>15</sup> See in this sense *Chapters III, IV and V*.

<sup>16</sup> Arguments for understanding net art<sup>(?)</sup> works as complex dynamic networks rather than clearly defined objects, appear in the work of Daniels (2009), Sakrowski (2009), Moss (2019), or Turki (2019) mentioned above.

<sup>17</sup> A downside of the designation 'Internet Art' according to Annet Dekker (Dekker 2018, 20).

affordances of the internet are highly relevant for such works, but do not necessarily circumscribe them.

Discourses concerned with 'post-digital art' and 'post-internet art' have pertinently insisted that contemporary art<sup>(?)</sup> practices operate in (and problematize) a context in which the distinction between digital and non-digital, online and offline, is increasingly blurred, a context characterized by the fact that digital computation is deeply inscribed in the fabric of our reality (Berry and Dieter 2015, 1-6). In view of this, Gene McHugh, for example, identifies five interrelated meanings of the 'post-internet':

1. New Media art made after the launch of the World Wide Web, and thus, the introduction of mainstream culture to the internet.
2. Marisa Olson's definition: Art made *after* one's use of the internet. "The yield" of her surfing and computer use, as she describes it.
3. Art responding to a general cultural condition that may also be described as "Post Internet"—when the internet is less a novelty and more a banality.
4. What Guthrie Lonergan described as "Internet Aware"—or when the photo of the art object is more widely dispersed than the object itself.
5. Art from the Internet world that mutates to the conventions of the art world. As the work mutates itself to become more like art world art, the work mutates art world art to become more like the Internet. (McHugh 2011, 16)

In all of these senses, 'post-internet art' refers to practices that critically reflect on the increasingly blurred line between online and offline experience, and problematize from within the ubiquity of the technological network. Yet, it seems to me that the rather unfortunate prefix inscribes the terms

'post-digital' and 'post-internet' in an inadequate temporality (Cox 2015, 151-61)—despite the insistence that 'post-' should not be understood in its temporal connotations in this case—and contradicts their very premises.<sup>18</sup> Also, as Caitlin Jones suggests, dropping the 'net' from net art<sup>(?)</sup>, or replacing it with 'post-internet' (or 'post-digital' for that matter) risks obfuscating the critical knowledge about the network context of our lives and losing the capacity to explore and deconstruct the effects of the technological network upon our lived realities (Jones 2018, 88)—thus obscuring the very internet-awareness that the 'post-internet' (and, similarly, 'post-digital') is supposed to point towards. Hence, I lean towards the older, established designation 'net art'. Nonetheless, I introduce the superscripted parenthetical question mark, whose first function is to recognize (by marking in print) the pertinence of this debate, the pertinence of the concerns raised by 'post-digital art' and 'post-internet art', and more importantly in order to underline the relevance for our discussion of art<sup>(?)</sup> practices associated with these alternative umbrella terms.

Consequently, in this first sense, the parenthetical question mark also functions in distancing my understanding of net art<sup>(?)</sup> from definitions that rely exclusively on medium specificity. The term net art<sup>(?)</sup> points rather towards Tom Corby's definition of 'network art':

[...] network art is inclusive of practices that are formally complex but also works in which technology is not a necessary and present condition for the realization and dissemination of the work—such as books and performance. That is not to say that network art is inclusive of all forms of creativity that have a passing relationship with

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<sup>18</sup> See also Geoff Cox and Jacob Lund's essay *The Contemporary Condition: Introductory Thoughts on Contemporaneity & Contemporary Art* (2016). Cox and Lund argue that terms such as 'post-internet art' are demonstrations of an onto-epistemological confusion that inadvertently collapses in a totalizing logic of periodization the uneven and layered coming together of temporalities that characterizes the contemporary condition (Cox and Lund 2016, 10-15).



the Net or deal with the consequences of informational processing. This definition does not include approaches that uncritically exploit networked technologies as a marketing opportunity for older forms of art—but rather is inclusive of practices that thoughtfully respond to the emergence of and widespread social, cultural, economic impact and take up of networked information technologies. (Corby 2006, 2)

Viewed in this way, net art(?) works rather than being 'medium specific' are instead instances of critically engaging the specificity of networked digital media—critically engaging, that is, problems related to the networked conditions that ground their production (including technological aspects, but also social, political, and environmental issues among others).

The second meaning of the '(?)' stems from insisting that this research is itself nothing more (and nothing less) than a process of specta(c)torship.<sup>19</sup> The question that this project faces is one of specific dynamic relations and the corporealities emerging from them, and not one of categorizations and mappings. I am not talking at any point about net art(?) as a firm category, but rather use the term as a loose handle to refer to a heterogeneous set of interrelated works. The works discussed in this text come together by virtue of more or less explicit relations between them (as these relations appear in the process of specta(c)torship) and not because they belong to the same category. The second function of the parenthetical question mark is to remind the reader that net art(?) is not something in itself that one could positively describe, but a contingent handle, useful for thought as long as it is not confused with a stable category.

A third function of the appended '(?)', the most basic one, is to highlight the hesitation of using the term 'art' at all. Let us take an example. Lin Ke's *Data Foam Board* (2013) is a print screen of a

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<sup>19</sup> I develop on the meaning of specta(c)torship in the next section.

MacBook desktop wallpaper representing a rocky ocean shore. Numerous desktop icons named 'data' are superimposed on the sea foam from the wallpaper image. This digital image is subsequently printed and exhibited in offline art spaces (archival inkjet print 120 x 57.56 cm).<sup>20</sup> Is this art?

Honestly, I do not know. But I do find the question relevant. It is a work that provokes, or allows something to happen, something that I call specta(c)torship and that I am trying to understand. The desktop loses its utility to become a playground. We are reminded that the wallpaper is a stream of data that has to be synthesized in an image by perception. But is the printed image of the work still a stream of data or is it something else? Is data cut out from its flow still data? Or does it dissipate like foam? Is there an aesthetics to the flows of data and can it be captured? What is the relation between me(?) the spectator and the data? What is the relation between me(?) the spectator and the visual representation of data? What is the relation between me(?) the spectator and the playful visual representation of the visual representation of data? Is there any difference if the representation is digital or analogue? Does it matter if it is an analogue representation of a digital one (a digitally made analogue representation)? Should I(?) think about all this or should I(?) just laugh at the joke? What did Lin Ke intend? Does it matter what Lin Ke intended? How does 'Lin Ke' function as metadata for the work (as a label)? Am I(?) more than metadata with respect to the work (the <sup>n</sup>th viewer)? Is there a work? What is the work? The abstract image? The image instantiated on each computer monitor? The print of the digital image? etc. Rather naive questions, maybe, but enough

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<sup>20</sup> An image of this work can be found in Bao Dong's article *Lin Ke: When New Media Becomes Old* (Dong 2014). Bao Dong notes regarding Lin Ke's practice: 'Lin Ke's studio is his 2008 MacBook Pro, preloaded with the Mac OS X 10.6.8 operating system and standard software including the Safari web browser, Preview image viewer, and QuickTime 7.0 Pro for video, along with the addition of image editing software Photoshop CS4 and Screenium for screencasting. This is his working environment; the internet provides an endless supply of material.' (Dong 2014)

to destabilize the established relations that I(?) have with the technology I(?) am immersed in. This is the focal point of this project: processes spectra(c)torship that problematizes the affordances of digital networks. We can agree to call the works that open up such processes 'art', or we can call them anything else. The works included in this research are pertinent to the subject not because they are institutionally acknowledged as art(?)works, but only inasmuch as they provoke or allow a process of spectra(c)torship to happen.

Nonetheless, the art(?)work by itself will not tell us if it will or will not provoke an instance of spectra(c)torship—there are no objective criteria that would foretell the beginning of the process of spectra(c)torship—and, against an institutional theory of art, neither will the institutional context, the art-world. The opening of a process of spectra(c)torship, the opening of a crisis in which one's own(?) body and the world are (de)constructed, is not something that can be institutionally ratified. So who decides what is art(?) and what is not, where spectra(c)torship happens and where it does not? No one. When it happens one can follow it, that is all.<sup>21</sup> One cannot calculate it or predict it.

Specta(c)torship always happens from the outside, it is improbable, cannot be accounted for in terms of probabilities and chains of causality. Hence, in a third sense, the '(?)' is supposed to keep the undecidability of art(?)—as that which is susceptible to provoke an instance of spectra(c)torship—from collapsing into an explicit answer, and also to attest to the improbability of the process that we are trying to understand.

Fourthly, in spite of numerous theoretical efforts to the contrary, the term 'art' tends to carry in itself a hint towards a distinction between 'art' and 'real life'. This duality is so present in its history that it

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<sup>21</sup> Although, I will argue, there is a method to the active/passive waiting/attention (attente/attention) that allows spectra(c)torship to happen and that further drives the process of spectra(c)torship. This does not mean though that something or someone can make spectra(c)torship happen.

unwillingly resurfaces every time the question 'what is art?' is asked. And this question is always intertwined with the problematic of the institutional art-world and of the regimes of power that inhere in it. The positions of net art<sup>(?)</sup> practitioners in this respect are varied. As Christiane Paul mentions, some have explicitly opposed 'institutionalization' and resisted being assimilated into the institutional art-world, while others argued that their work should be considered in the context of 'art in general' and be exhibited in galleries and museums (Paul 2009, 103). Again, for us, it is relevant to open up the question rather than to side with one of the possible answers. If nothing else, at least as an acknowledgement of the often-heard refrain 'this is not art' (present among art<sup>(?)</sup> practitioners both on- and offline), the inadequacy of the concept will be marked by the parenthetical superscripted question mark. The insertion of the '(?)', by keeping open the uncomfortable ambiguity of what counts and what does not count as 'art', gestures towards Rachel Greene's warning in the introduction to their seminal book *Internet Art*:

To confine the field to dominant art discourse would muffle its most vital anarchic tendencies and undermine the benefits of a precise study of its singularities. Moreover, one cannot gloss over the mutual suspicion between internet artists and institutions of official culture, such as museums and galleries, that have persisted since the form's inception' (Greene 2004, 12)

Therefore, in this fourth sense, the appended '(?)' marks the tense relationship between net art<sup>(?)</sup> practice and art-institutions, and with it also the increasingly maligned, but not yet surpassed, distinction between 'art' and 'real life'.

### 3. Specta(c)torship

One of the basic functions of the superscripted parenthetical question mark of 'art<sup>(?)</sup>', as noted in the previous section, is to point towards the dependency of the definition of art<sup>(?)</sup> on the process of specta(c)torship. But what does 'specta(c)torship' mean?

While it is too early at this stage to define specta(c)torship,<sup>22</sup> there are nonetheless four aspects that should be briefly addressed here in order to start delineating the understanding that this text proposes: the problematic of activity/passivity inherent in specta(c)torship; the relationship between specta(c)torship and visuality; the problematic of writing as a gesture of specta(c)torship; and the relationship between the question of specta(c)torship and that of embodiment.

#### *The active/passive spectator*

It is not unusual in the literature concerned with net art<sup>(?)</sup> to encounter a tendency to emphasize the agency of the spectator, inasmuch as they are required to actively engage with the art<sup>(?)</sup>works. This tendency is often reflected in the replacement of the term 'spectator' with those of 'user' (see for eg. Lialina and Espenschied 2015), interactor (eg. Simanowski 2011), or inter-acteur (Turki 2019) among others.

In 'Do You Believe in Users / Turning Complete User' Olia Lialina and Dragan Espenschied underline the central role of the user in the history of computer technology and the fallacy of a clear-cut distinction between the figure of an empowered hacker/programmer and a disempowered user. They advocate for a study of digital folklore—'the customs, traditions and elements of visual, textual, and audio culture that emerged from users' engagement with personal computer applications' (Lialina and Espenschied 2015, 1-2). From this perspective, the process of online

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<sup>22</sup> For the definition of specta(c)torship see *Chapter V*.

specta(c)torship (and also an important part of net art<sup>(?)</sup> practice) is an aspect of being a user, and, in fact, a strict distinction between artists and spectators does not quite make sense. Josephine Bosma, as another example, insists that the relationship between artists and audience changes essentially in new media art<sup>(?)</sup>, and under the heading of the 'active audience' discusses interactive practices that allow the audience to engage in the work socially or personally, beyond simply 'clicking buttons' (Bosma 2006). In this sense, the audience is involved in the very production of the work—a position that resonates with Turki's notion of 'inter-acteur' that was mentioned above (Turki 2019). In a different line of enquiry, Roberto Simanowski is critical of the theoretical paradigm that focusses on embodied interactivity at the expense of meaning (Simanowski 2011, 120-2, 156-7). Nonetheless, Simanowski uses the terms 'spectator' and 'interactor' interchangeably. Rather than simply downplaying the interactive dimension of net art<sup>(?)</sup> specta(c)torship, Simanowski's point is that the interactivity that the works require has an important hermeneutic component.<sup>23</sup> Although the texts mentioned here rely on very different theoretical perspectives, and their arguments are not necessarily compatible, nonetheless they all insist on the active meaning of being a spectator in online environments.

At the same time, positions that uncritically eulogize the agency of the online spectator are criticized for falling into a utopian view of the digital network, a view that fails to notice the extent to which the internet can be disempowering and constraining, depriving the user/interactor/inter-acteur of its very agency (see for eg. White 2006, 22-3, Taylor 2019, 5-14, but also Simanowski's critique mentioned above). Michele White advocates, in this sense, for using the terms 'spectator' and 'spectatorship' with respect to the internet, rather than 'user', in order to underline the mediation of the screen and the passive aspects of engaging with digital network technology (for example

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<sup>23</sup> Also, importantly, in Simanowski's view interactivity is not exclusively a characteristic of digital art<sup>(?)</sup>, and it is not necessarily empowering (Simanowski 2011).

sitting on a chair for hours in a row<sup>24</sup>), but also, on the other hand, in order to foreground that no spectator is ever completely passive (White 2006, 8-10)—hence, that the terms 'spectator' and 'spectatorship' can accommodate the active meaning of interaction.

Following these debates, it is important for us to keep in mind the eminently political question of activity/passivity in the process of net art(?) specta(c)torship (in relation to the problematic of empowerment and disempowerment), yet this topic will have to be reformulated in terms pertinent to the theory of specta(c)torship as a process of individuation.<sup>25</sup> For now, inspired by Augusto Boal's term 'spect-actor' (Boal 2008),<sup>26</sup> the function of the (c) of specta(c)torship is to open up (and keep in the Open) the problematic of activity/passivity inherent to the process of specta(c)torship, a problematic that was hinted at above by the figure of Zhong Ziqi, and that surfaces in theoretical discourses concerned with net art(?) through the debates around concepts such as user, interactor, or inter-acteur.

### *Specta(c)torship and visuality*

Designations such as user/ interactor/ inter-acteur move beyond the problematic of visuality, and in doing so they evoke a rich thread of theoretical attempts to understand new media (and particularly the internet) in more synesthetic terms than just visual or audiovisual. Laura U. Marks, for example, insists on the haptic aspects of experimental new media and proposes a form of criticism that would

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<sup>24</sup> For an interesting consideration of the 'cramped and bent bodies, bloated forms, errant flesh, static positions, and aches and pains that occur because of the computer, keyboard, and screen' see *The Flat and the Fold: A Consideration of Embodied Spectatorship*, the powerful afterward to White's book on 'Internet Spectatorship' (White 2006, 177-197)

<sup>25</sup> It is only after critically addressing Simondon's theory of individuation in *Chapters III, IV, and V* that it will be possible to reformulate this political question.

<sup>26</sup> See *Chapter I* below, where I expand on Boal's position.

'restore a flow between the haptic and the optical' (Marks 2002, xiii). In the case of online art<sup>(?)</sup>works such haptic criticism pays attention to the different levels of materiality that the works reveal, hence rejecting a view of the internet as a disembodied transcendental space (Marks 2002, 177-191). Going in a somewhat similar direction, against understanding new media in terms of (audio-)visual representation, Erin Manning theorizes new technologies as 'relationscapes' that provide new potentialities for movement and thought, and in consequence new potentialities for the becoming of living bodies (Manning 2009, 5-11). The discussion of digital media in Manning's text is grounded in a critique of experiments with new technologies in contemporary dance, but it is also possible to understand the user/ interactor/ inter-acteur/ spectator of net art<sup>(?)</sup> as participating in a problematic of embodiment similar to that of the dancing bodies that Manning's text explicitly focusses on. Manning argues that many experiments with digital technologies in contemporary dance reduce body movement to bits, transforming gestures in data for technology and failing to contribute to 'movement's experiential wholeness' (Manning 2009, 63). This happens when the technological layer of the work is simply triggered by gestures that the software can recognize, hence stabilizing the body and precluding the creation of new 'ecologies of experience' (Manning 2009, 63-66)—in the case of net art<sup>(?)</sup> specta(c)torship this is the problematic of inputs (moving the mouse, mouse clicks, pressing keys on the keyboard etc.) understood simply as gestures of a predefined body, as gestures of a 'human' spectator. For Manning, digital technologies (inasmuch as they have to operate with actual ones and zeroes and rely on preset parameters) tend to stabilize the possible becomings of the moving body, and in order to recover the unknowability of the body we would have to create the context in which bodies are emergent with the technology rather than being simply added to it, or rather than simply adding technology to the body as external prosthesis (Manning 2009, 65).



While my interest in embodied subjectivity deeply resonates with these attempts at conceptualizing new technologies and the internet in terms that go beyond visibility, nonetheless I posit this theoretical enquiry as a discourse on 'specta(c)torship'. Why returning to a terminology that etymologically implies seeing, the power of the gaze, *specto*, when the visual regimes that ground our society come increasingly under critique, and works that operate at the intersection of art(?) and technology arguably allow us to move away from the strictly the audio-visual domain into more complex explorations of the 'haptic' (Marks) or of 'movement's experiential wholeness' (Manning)?

Paradoxically, it is exactly because of the relevance of such critique that *seeing* cannot be eluded from the question. Moving beyond visibility implies a critical examination of the visual rather than simply neglecting it, as Marks' concept of 'haptic *visuality*' implies. Critical approaches to visual media have cogently argued, that our experience of the world is now more centered on visual and visualization than it ever was before (Mirzoeff 1999), that our capacity to see and make sense of ourselves and of our world passes through technologies of perception and representation such as photography, cinematography and electronic media (Sobchack 2004, 135-162), or that visual representation systems participate in both the reinforcement and the problematization of the political unconscious formed by the dominant order (Mulvey 1989, 14-26)—specifically the cinema in Mulvey's argument, but a critical reading of this contention can be extended to contemporary networked digital media (see White 2006, 35-55). The corollary of all these positions is that in order to navigate the contemporary condition we need to critically approach the question of visibility, rather than pretending to simply circumvent it.<sup>27</sup> As Heidegger observes in *The Age of the World Picture*, ours is a cultural context predicated on visibility, in which representation permeates

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<sup>27</sup> See in this sense also (White 2006, 8). White contends that looking is still a significant aspect of computer use, despite theoretical attempts of postulating the 'user' beyond the problematic of visibility. While agreeing with White's position, the argument here will take a different trajectory.

everything, starting with materiality in its (infinitely mediated) immediacy.<sup>28</sup> There is no outside of the visual, strictly speaking, at least not in the sense of an absolute exterior where one could be positively placed beyond the world canceled in (visual) representation.

I understand then the process of specta(c)torship, as a critical folding of the system of representation against itself, a folding of visibility against itself—which opens up towards positions such as those formulated by Marks and Manning. In specta(c)torship we find ourselves(?) catching a glimpse of the closure of representation from within, (de)constructing it as it were by being affected into leaving ourselves(?) behind (see the figure of Zhong Ziqi).<sup>29</sup>

#### *Writing as a gesture of specta(c)torship*

'Speaking is not seeing' claims Blanchot (Blanchot [1969] 1993, 25). 'To see is to make use of separation, not as mediating, but as a means of immeditation, as immediating' (Blanchot [1969] 1993, 28), while speaking (which is always already writing), Blanchot insists, constitutes a peculiar relation to the (impossible) outside, it constitutes a detour that is suspended between visible and invisible. Speaking, for Blanchot, is (constitutively) relation to the Other as absolute otherness, as absolute outside. Speaking means attending to (waiting for, paying attention to, caring for) the turn and return inherent in the relation to the absolute outsideness of the Other. Consequently, speaking

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<sup>28</sup> 'Hence world picture, when understood essentially, does not mean a picture of the world, but the world conceived and grasped as picture. What is, in its entirety, is now taken in such a way that it first is in being and only is in being to the extent that it is set up by man, who represents and sets forth. Wherever we have the world picture, an essential decision takes place regarding what is, in its entirety. The Being of whatever is, is sought and found in the representedness of the latter' (Heidegger [1950] 1977, 129-130). My reading of this argument in terms of materiality and (im)mediation, obviously, reformulates this insight in terms that are relevant for my work, different from those preferred by Heidegger.

<sup>29</sup> The argument for this position can be found in *Chapter V*.

is incommensurable with the evidence of seeing, with the figure of immediacy involved in sight.<sup>30</sup> What Blanchot misses, though, is the intensive dimension of seeing before sight, the intensive affective plane of visibility before being canceled in representation, before being canceled in the immediacy of presence. Against Blanchot, seeing is not seeing (in the Blanchodian sense of immediation) either. There is a turn to seeing before the image, there is an intensive affectivity that comes to be canceled in sight as well as in writing<sup>31</sup>—and it is this intensive field that is at stake in specta(c)torship. If *speaking* is not *seeing*, this is not because *seeing* cancels difference in immediation, while *speaking* does not, but rather because the genesis of representation is different in the two cases. One sees what cannot be spoken and speaks what cannot be seen (cf. Deleuze [1986] 2004, 55-75).

There are always ideal and intensive remainders in the genesis of representation: *speaking* (with Blanchot) operates from within the ideal and intensive genesis of *seeing* derailing it and turning it against itself, but it has access to the ideal and intensive only as the remainder of *seeing* (and more generally *perceiving*)—as that which cannot be canceled in sensorial representation, a remainder in-

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<sup>30</sup> For Blanchot's formulation of the difference between 'speaking' and 'seeing' see (Blanchot [1969] 1993, 25-32).

<sup>31</sup> This intensive affectivity is 'immediating' in Erin Manning's sense of the term (Manning 2020, 37), as relation that produces the presence of the individuals who come to be in relation, experience that 'grows from the middle'. This is essentially different, though, from the sense of immediation that I criticize here, namely, the canceling of difference in the seemingly immediate experience of presence. The argument resonates with Manning's position, even if the choice of terminology is at odds: the present of sensible experience is infinitely mediated (in my words)/the result of immediation (in Manning's words), and sensible experience (seeing in our case, and it is not just an example among others) always points backwards towards the contingency of its genesis. The detour towards the Outside, that Blanchot reserves for speaking, is performed just as much in seeing, in those instances where seeing goes beyond representation—as for example in Mark's 'haptic visibility' (2002).

formed (striated) by the process of *seeing* of which it is the remainder. *Speaking*, while opening towards this 'outside' of sensible experience, nonetheless cancels it towards representation—a representation that remains constitutively incompatible with that produced by *seeing*. At the very same time, *seeing* (and *perceiving* more generally) is nothing but an operation grounded in the remainder of 'linguistic' representation—a remainder in-formed (striated) by the language of which it is the remainder (where language has to be understood as basic signification: a trace that (dis)orients).<sup>32</sup> Phenomena (and visual phenomena among them) do not constitute a primordial ground, as sometimes understood in existential phenomenology,<sup>33</sup> but emerge only in an ideal and intensive interplay that is always already striated by language.<sup>34</sup> Nonetheless, as Deleuze insists in his study on Foucault, *speaking* does not causally determine *seeing*, and neither does *seeing* causally determine *speaking*, they are different operations continuously intertwined with each other but functioning under different regimes (Deleuze [1986] 2004, 55-75). What is common to *speaking* and *seeing* is the interplay of ideal planes and intensive fields that are negotiated and canceled (in different yet strictly intertwined ways) in language and sight—an interplay which, I will argue, is itself recurrently grounded in the (de)construction of its actual (mis)representations. The point here

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<sup>32</sup> It should be noted that this is not an understanding limited to 'humans', but a characterization of the condition of being alive. Perception is in its basic meaning *time*, i.e. difference (more exactly 'différance'), while signification is the potentiality of directed movement, the potentiality of following a trace, i.e. (dis)orientation.

<sup>33</sup> For example in the film phenomenology developed by Sobchack (1992), which is an important reference for phenomenologically inflected studies of net art and specta(c)torship in net art—see for example White (2006).

<sup>34</sup> Cf. Sarah Ahmed's insistence that phenomena depend upon the history of their arrival, i.e. that the coagulation of phenomena is oriented, and that this orientation is historically contingent (Ahmed 2006, 41-44, 65-107)—hence Ahmed's argument for the importance of a politics of disorientation (Ahmed 2006, 157-179).

is that *seeing* operates in relation to an outside of *speaking*, just as much as *speaking* operates in relation to an outside of *seeing*.

It takes a coagulation of intensity into images in order to reach the distance negated as immediacy in sight. Before the image there is always this coagulation, this individuation, this construction—which is always also a (de)construction—that, using Blanchot's words, should be called 'the turn of the turning, the "version" that is always in the process of inverting itself and that in itself bears the back and forth of a divergence' (Blanchot [1969] 1993, 30). And continuing the phrase with and against Blanchot: the speech (of) which we are trying to speak (which is always already writing) is a return to this first turning, namely to the intensive (im)possibility of sight and language. The imminent outside is always deferred and differed, always after the next step, and the intensity of this deferral is canceled both in sight and in language, in incongruent yet strictly interrelated ways. Specta(c)torship, as it will be understood here, is in this sense a process that decentres representation from within, patiently, wearily, by dwelling in the space of this intensive deferral; a deconstruction of visibility and of writing through each other (even when, or especially when, specta(c)torship is not strictly visual), a deconstruction that lets a possible closure of the system of representation be glimpsed yet not reached, a closure that is at the same time that of a system of writing. Thus the methodological imperative, inherent in such processes of specta(c)torship, to follow the movement of sense towards and against language and sight, towards and against language as sight and sight as language (towards and against the pretended stability of the system of representation as relations between subjects and objects that are identical with themselves).

What does this methodological imperative mean more exactly? It means that it is necessary to write in an experimental language that plays at the borders of what is possible and what is proper in a

given language, folding language against itself (and failing to do so).<sup>35</sup> The attempt in this project is to practice writing as a gesture of specta(c)torship, rather than using writing to reflect on the process of specta(c)torship from its outside. In other words, to be clear, I claim that this text is not simply 'about' net art<sup>(?)</sup> specta(c)torship, but a trace left by a process of net art<sup>(?)</sup> specta(c)torship folded against itself (the trace left by a process of net art<sup>(?)</sup> specta(c)torship that is reflexively concerned with its dynamic).<sup>36</sup>

There are two different registers of research and writing that coagulate in this experiment. On the one hand, the attempt is to follow impulses that emerge in the dynamic relational fields that constitute specific instances of specta(c)torship: a type of writing that exists as an erratic trace of the process through which the embodied spectator (also the embodied subject that comes to sign the written trace) and the work of art<sup>(?)</sup> emerge;<sup>37</sup> a form of writing that is necessarily unstable and non-teleological, that literally has no purpose. On the other hand, the attempt is to recursively navigate the themes that emerge from these erratic traces, to coagulate them around stable concepts, and to thematize the intrinsic failure of doing so. In this case it is a question of playing the traces left by the process of specta(c)torship against themselves, and against a consistent philosophical framework (specifically, the theory of individuation), not in order to solve the tensions that

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<sup>35</sup> Lengthy parenthetical remarks, parenthetical letters, superscripted question marks, invented words, the use of HTML and JavaScript code to sonify the spaces between the words, printing specific words between non-functional HTML tags, and the introduction of aporetic concepts are among the strategies employed in this text.

<sup>36</sup> In the same sense, in the context of this project, I take the critical reading of theoretical texts (especially the reading of Gilbert Simondon's theory of individuation) to be a process of specta(c)torship rather than an objective analysis of these texts from an outside.

<sup>37</sup> An erratic trace inasmuch as there is no telos to specta(c)torship, but also as a consequence of the destabilization of the art<sup>(?)</sup>work (widely discussed in the field, see above) because it does not provide anymore a stable point of reference (if an art<sup>(?)</sup>work ever did that).

generated them, but, on the contrary, in order to intensify them, deepening the crisis of specta(c)torship by unpacking its premisses and following its consequences. Let us call these two registers of research and writing, provisionally, *erring* and *labyrinth*.

The *erring* stages start with the works (or rather with specific instances of specta(c)torship), they have no clear telos and no pre-established function to perform: problems emerge as one follows the impulses inherent in the works. The *labyrinth* sections go over the same problematic space all over again, rethinking and reformulating the problems, this time from the point of view of the theory of individuation. Erring leaves traces, and these traces can be followed. Following a trace is not anymore erring. Erring is fluid, it cannot be stabilized, it cannot be halted, its directions cannot be predicted. But the paths it carves are stable, quite a labyrinth to get lost in. The same river twice. Pli. La plissure du texte. Stable paths that never reach their destination, that point towards a solution always receding and towards a beginning as a lack of origin. The labyrinth as the imminence of a solution (see below).

Writing and rewriting, turning and returning, the two threads became more and more entangled, to the point of being at times hardly distinguishable. That being said, *Chapters II, IV and VI* still bear the traces of the *erring* stages of the project, while *Chapters I, III and V* emerged mostly from the *labyrinth* stages. What happens in this movement in two steps is a dynamic of destabilization and re-stabilization of the problematic field addressed in this project, a dynamic that uncovers it from different and surprising angles. As a consequence, this text is not only addressing net art<sup>(?)</sup> specta(c)torship from the perspective of the theory of individuation, but also operates interventions in the theory of individuation through a process of net art<sup>(?)</sup> specta(c)torship.

Yet, the possibility of writing about specta(c)torship, or even as a gesture of specta(c)torship, is necessarily a symptom of its failure, an erring against language and sight, against signification and representation, that coagulates as language, as sight, as signification, as representation. The outside always remains 'a venir', imminently, always after the next step, after the next turn. In this sense the parenthetical *c* of specta(c)torship marks the *différance* of seeing from itself (also of seeing from speaking), and with it the (de)construction of the system of representation, which, we will see, implies the (de)construction of the embodied thinking subject. Such are the stakes of specta(c)torship.

### *Specta(c)torship and embodied subjectivity*

Mark Hansen argues in *New Philosophy for New Media* that beneath any technical image lies *the framing function* of what he calls the 'human' body (Hansen 2004, 7-8). Hansen bases his position on the Bergsonian insight that the world is composed of images, and that perception means the selection of a subset of images by a *center of indetermination*, that is, by the living body (Hansen 2004, 3-8). For Hansen, as media lose their material specificity—this being, in his account, an important characteristic of the digital—'the body takes on a more prominent function as a selective processor of information' (Hansen 2004, 21), the body informs the medial interfaces through its perceptual and affective possibilities (Hansen 2004, 21). What Hansen means is that the digital image, and by extension the digital art(?) work, has no existence prior to being framed by the body. The content of the digital work, whatever that might be, is 'generated only in and through the viewer's corporeal, affective experience, as a quasi-autonomous creation' (Hansen 2004, 28). Importantly, for Hansen, the body that frames the digital work, in doing so, also frames itself (Hansen 2004, 12). We will take this insight as our starting point. Yet, the problem with Hansen's account is the assumption that the body of the spectator, this body that frames itself through specta(c)torship, is 'human'. In contrast, let us start by going backwards and asking what is 'human'



to the body? Is this qualification necessary? And, what happens when this label is attached? Our being 'human'—the way in which that happens, to what extent and with what consequences—is an open question, not an *a priori* truth that we can uncritically rely upon.

I read Hansen's argument as being a compelling demonstration that the framing function of the body with respect to digital works is essentially different from the framing function of the body with respect to analogue media. Consequently, the body which is framing itself (in the same process) must be essentially different—hence the interrogation of the label 'human'. I take specta(c)torship to mean (de)constructing one's(?) body in the process of engaging with a work that itself exists only through this encounter and, as one of the first consequences of interrogating the label 'human', the difference between the work and the body becomes beautifully blurred. *Chapter II* will further examine, along these lines, what it means to name a body 'human', however for the purpose of this initial argument suffice to say that: on the one hand, net art(?) specta(c)torship will be understood, in line with Hansen's argument, as a process through which the online work emerges inasmuch as it is framed by a body, and the body emerges inasmuch as it is being framed by the encounter with the work; on the other hand, this time diverging from Hansen, I will abstain from

immediately qualifying as 'human' this *center of indetermination* that emerges in the process of forging images.<sup>38</sup>

What is at stake in the process of specta(c)torship is the way 'we', the spectators, understand our own(?) bodies, and, at the same time, the very being and becoming of these bodies (the body framing 'itself'). Specta(c)torship uncovers (inasmuch as it provokes) and provokes (inasmuch as it uncovers) infinitesimal shifts in what the bodies engaged in (/by) this process are, do and mean, and these shifts are dependent on the particularities of the technologies (both in the sense of machinery/devices and in the sense of scientific and philosophical, but also political, discourses on the *technē* and subtended by the *technē*) involved in this process. Any such minute disturbance has rippling effects that range from how we define ourselves as individuals, to the dynamics of the socio-economic and political structures that we are immersed in, to the way we perceive and understand our environment, and all the way back to what the bodies involved in the process of specta(c)torship are, do and mean and how they become. An eternal return of the body, but not of the same body. The 'human' body, if it was ever there, is glitched in this feedback loop. Differences intensify in countless repetitions, and an ever-widening gap opens between our(?) unstable bodies always on the point of leaving themselves behind, and the inertial, institutionally reinforced understanding of

---

<sup>38</sup> A general remark on the ethical aspects of such a project must be made here. Criticizing the 'human' does not mean condoning any kind of brutality. On the contrary, the main point of the argument is that labeling a body 'human' already constitutes an unacceptable aggression against it—that something essential is lost in order for the tag 'human' to make sense. Criticizing the 'human' does not mean opening the door to abuse against embodied subjects but an exponential enlargement of responsibility—and I hope this will be clear throughout this text for the reader. The social and political risk of such views—a risk which we cannot afford to ignore—is paralysis under this immense responsibility that we have towards the other, and not a surge in brutality. That is to say, from an ethical point of view, 'humanism' already supposes an unacceptable aggression inscribed at its core, even when it functions at its best. The ethical striving of 'humanism' is to be exponentially complexified and not erased.

these bodies as stable givens (i.e. 'human bodies'). It is in this gap, in the space of this *crisis*, that the present work operates.

Echoing Deleuze and Guattari's discussion of the body without organs in *A Thousand Plateaus* (Deleuze and Guattari 1987), without strictly following their lead, I call 'bodies' the complex, ill-defined, fluid assemblages that ground the triplet organism, signification, subjectification, and that, from the perspective of the embodied 'human' subject, can be reached only through deterritorialization movements that destabilize the stratified organism and the signification and subjectification systems that ground it. In Brian Massumi's terms we could understand these fluid assemblages as *bodies without image* (Massumi 2002, 57-58). Except that the body always has to keep a bit of the image that it is struggling against. And this project is concerned primarily with this failure. I will pay attention to the imposition of a specific set of signs, a specific set of *images* on these *bodies without image*, that is, I will pay attention to the way in which fluid assemblages of intensities, are censored and modeled in order for the familiar *form* of a 'human body' to make sense (and with it the interplay of organism, subjectification and signification), as well as to the failed struggles against this image and to their consequences.<sup>39</sup>

In this context, specta(c)torship should be understood as an intensive field of individuation, and not merely as a mode of a subject-object relation—in other words, the problematic of specta(c)torship is not that of 'embodied human subjects' interacting with works of art(?), but rather that of a system of corporealities emerging in a process of individuation. At the same time, the question is: how and why this system comes to be (mis)understood as 'human bodies' in relation with works of art(?)

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<sup>39</sup> For a further discussion concerning the definition of the body as assemblage of intensities, see *Chapter I*, section *I.1. The Embodied Who as a Field of Relations*.

Admittedly, all this is absurd at this point; it is a leap away from an outdated, if still prevalent, anthropocentric paradigm, towards a fiction with a post-humanist tint. Jumping from one extreme term of the crisis to the other, ignoring the labyrinth in between, is never enough. Nonetheless, stepping into the convoluted space of this crisis (into the labyrinth that we ourselves are), cannot be anything but a necessary error (the very error through which the labyrinth emerges) (see *Chapter I* below).

It will take a further elaboration of the question of individuation—and more specifically, in Simondonian terms, an outline of the process of technical individuation in relation to psychic individuation and the problematic of the transindividual—in order to clarify the problematic of net art<sup>(?)</sup> specta(c)torship in particular, and specta(c)torship more generally, with respect to the questions of bodies and embodiment contoured above. Meanwhile, this brief sketch will be enough to give us the first clues about the problematic that, I claim, is missing from the discussions of net art<sup>(?)</sup>: the (de)construction of the embodied subject in the process of specta(c)torship. This position is essentially different from arguing that a given biological 'human' body is extended, enhanced, deconstructed or otherwise modified in its interaction with digital technology. Rather, I argue that the body in its organicity exists only through its (de)constructions.

Thus, extending Hansen's argument that the body of the spectator is framing itself in the encounter with the art<sup>(?)</sup>work, this text discusses the bodies that emerge in the process of net art<sup>(?)</sup> specta(c)torship, and the forces that shape them, asking:

What are then the *parerga* (the frames, the limits, the contours) that would define the bodies that emerge in net art<sup>(?)</sup> specta(c)torship?<sup>40</sup>

Can these bodies still be conceived as 'human'?

What is gained and what is lost by attaching the label 'human' to these bodies?

In a general sense, these will be the main questions guiding the present research; not that any positivist answers will be provided; these questions are rather markers of convoluted theoretical territories (interconnected labyrinths) that will be repeatedly traversed, sometimes in opposite directions. We will arrive again and again in the proximity of these questions, attempting not a closure by means of final answers but, on the contrary, the preservation of the tensions they open up. It will gradually become clear that these are immediate political problems and not mere theoretical speculations (if there ever is such thing as 'mere theoretical speculation').

At the same time, a question of methodology imposes itself (again): how to write about a body in its particularity while at the same time avoiding hastily enclosing it in the borders of the 'human'? How to write about a body before its submission to a strictly defined subjectivity that fits the specific power structures of humanism? That is, how to write about a body that slips from the grip of personal pronouns and possessives (but that is nonetheless specific, that is not 'the body', and

---

<sup>40</sup> I am using here Derrida's understanding of the *parergon* (Derrida [1978] 1987, 9)—that which belongs to the *ergon*, the work (in this case the body) as a surplus or a supplement, neither work nor outside work, but which nonetheless, from its marginal position, gives rise to the work. The choice of this terminology becomes instrumental for the arguments in *Chapter II*.

neither 'a body')?<sup>41</sup> Is it even possible for language to reach outside itself and point towards a singularity defined by fluid, ever-changing frames, to point towards a body that refuses the stability of the 'human'?

It is not by chance that by problematizing the body we arrive in the space of the same methodological question (regarding language and the possibility of writing) that was raised by problematizing visual representation (see above). Nonetheless it will take a further elaboration of specta(c)torship as individuation in order to explain why this happens and to show that this is indeed the same problematic.<sup>42</sup> For now, let us just reiterate that this methodological question haunts the present text, and while it remains without a final answer, three concrete consequences do coagulate (all three were already briefly discussed above): 1. the intertwining of *erring* and *labyrinth* threads that respond to two different registers of writing and research which aim to allow the body at stake in specta(c)torship (the embodied thinking subject (de)constructing itself in specta(c)torship) to inscribe its traces; 2. the necessity to experiment with the possibilities of language as a way of attending to that which comes to language from outside representation; 3. the necessary recognition that the process of specta(c)torship can coagulate in writing only as a

---

<sup>41</sup> I will often speak of 'my(?) body', 'one's(?) body' or 'one's own(?) body' in order to emphasize a certain specificity and to stress that it is not exact to say 'the body' and neither 'a body', also to underline that the 'I' happens somewhere upon this body, against it. Nonetheless, the personal pronouns and the possessives fail to grasp the complexity of a divergent body that is drifting away from subjectification, organism and signification, hence the appended '(?)' to note this inconsistency.

<sup>42</sup> To anticipate: because the process of specta(c)torship problematizes the conjunction of phenomenogenesis and ontogenesis.

symptom of its failure, namely as a fall into representation and signification of a process that deconstructs representation and signification.<sup>43</sup>

</p>

</div>

<script>

```
/* using the Web Audio API to set up an AudioContext, and declaring some global variables*/
```

```
const context = new AudioContext();
```

```
const gainNode = context.createGain();
```

```
gainNode.connect(context.destination);
```

```
gainNode.gain.value = 0.2;
```

```
const oscList = [];
```

```
const freqList = [];
```

```
let freq = null;
```

```
let f = null;
```

```
let osc = null;
```

```
/* a list of all the characters that the 'unfinished piano' takes into account */
```

---

<sup>43</sup> Which is to say, writing as a gesture of specta(c)torship (the writing that this project attempts to perform) cannot have any claim to truth. Neither to truth as adequation, because it always betrays the process that produces the written trace (specta(c)torship), nor to truth as unconcealment, because that which is to be revealed (the embodied thinking subject inasmuch as it is thinking) remains always 'a-venir' differed and deferred.

```

const characterSet = ["a", "b", "c", "d", "e", "f", "g", "h", "i", "j", "k", "l", "m", "n", "o", "p",
"q", "r", "s", "t", "u", "v", "w", "x", "y", "z", ",", ".", ":", ";", "(", ")", "[", "]", "?", "/", "!"];

/* this is the function called when pressing the 'Start' button */

function generateAudio() {

    /* hide the start button. no way of stoping or pausing the audio except by closing the page or
reloading it */

    document.getElementById("start").style.visibility = "hidden";

    /* create an array with 88 frequencies, roughly corresponding to the 88 piano keys.
(pretending to mimic an analogue musical instrument mirrors the channeling of writing performed
on digital devices into mimetic representations of analogue formats—software such as Word and
Pages operate as mimetic instruments) */

    for (i = 0; i < 88; i++) {

        f = 440 * (2 ** ((i - 49) / 12));

        freqList.push(f);

    }

    for (i = 0; i < 88; i++) {

        oscList.push(i);

    }

    /* now freqList contains the 88 frequencies, and oscList contains numbers from 0 to 87.

    call the function whatToPlay */

    whatToPlay();

}

```



```

/* here we figure out which frequencies to play */

function whatToPlay() {

    /* get the mainText from the document */

    var text = document.getElementById("mainText").innerHTML;

    /* if the text has less than 88 characters, then print on the page 'the end' and stop the audio
context;

    else, let's find out which frequencies to play; */

    if (text.length < 88) {

        var clape = text.toLowerCase().slice(0, text.length);

        document.getElementById("clape").innerHTML = clape;

        document.getElementById("mainText").innerHTML = "<b>the end</b>";

        context.close();

    } else {

        /* slice the first 88 characters from the text, and store them in a variable called 'clape';

        make these 88 characters more visible on the page;

        cut these 88 characters from the main text;

        */

        var clape = text.toLowerCase().slice(0, 88);

        document.getElementById("clape").innerHTML = clape;

        document.getElementById("mainText").innerHTML = text.slice(88, text.length);

        /* declare variables for:

```

the startMoment of each sound;

the duration of each sound;

the duration of each 88-character long sequence (called here lineDuration);

the variable 'alege' will help us choose randomly if the startMoment of the sound is decided based on the position of the previous character or that of the subsequent character;

```
*/
```

```
var startMoment = 0;
```

```
var duration = 0;
```

```
var lineDuration = 0;
```

```
var alege = 0;
```

```
/* for i going from 0 to 87 do the following: */
```

```
for (i = 0; i < 88; i++) {
```

```
    /* if the character in the position i is ' ' (space) then */
```

```
    if (clape[i] === " ") {
```

```
        /* if it is the first character in the sequence:
```

the startMoment has to be given by the index of the subsequent character (i+1); give it a duration of 1 sec (an exception from the rule, because there are no characters preceding it); call the playTone function letting it know the position of the ' ' in the sequence (given by i—which will tell playTone what frequency to play), the startMoment of the sound, and its duration.\*/

```
        if (i == 0) {
```

/\* startMoment (in seconds) is calculated by multiplying 1/10 (seconds) with the position of the next character (because in this case there is no previous character) in the characterSet that I defined;

1 + index of that character because the index starts from 0 and I actually want 'a' to return the value 1 not 0, 'b' 2, 'c' 3 etc; also, if a character is not found in the characterSet the value returned by indexOf is -1, adding 1 makes it 0, which avoids crushing the code by calling the function to produce a sound in the past)

```
*/  
  
startMoment = (1 / 10) * (1 + characterSet.indexOf(clape[i + 1]));  
  
duration = 1;  
  
playTone(i, startMoment, duration);  
  
  
//calculate lineDuration at this point  
  
lineDuration = startMoment + duration;  
  
  
//reset the duration to 0, for the next sound  
  
duration = 0;  
  
}
```

/\*else, if this is the last character in the sequence:

the startMoment has to be given by the index of the previous character (i-1); the duration accumulates with each character that is not a space (see the last *else* in this *for* loop), so in this case the duration is fine, no need for a special case; call playTone, as explained above;

```
*/  
  
else if (i == 87) {
```

```
startMoment = (1 / 10) * (1 + characterSet.indexOf(clape[i - 1]));  
  
playTone(i, startMoment, duration);
```

```
/* to get the duration of the entire sequence of 88 characters I simply need to find  
the highest value of startMoment + duration; so, if current lineDuration is smaller then the  
startMoment + duration of this sound, then update lineDuration to startMoment + duration of this  
sound; */
```

```
if (lineDuration < startMoment + duration) {  
    lineDuration = startMoment + duration;  
}
```

```
//reset duration to 0 for the next sound;
```

```
duration = 0;
```

```
}
```

```
/* else, if the ' ' is neither the first, nor the last character in the sequence, then:
```

```
randomly peak a value of -1 or 1 for the var alege;
```

startMoment will be determined either by the index in our characterSet of the previous character in the sequence (if alege turns out to be -1) or of the next character in the sequence (if alege turns out to be 1); this small randomization makes the piece slightly different every time, bringing to the fore the performative aspect of code: you are not listening to a piece that is prerecorded, but to your computer executing this code in real time;

call playTone as above; update lineDuration if needed; reset duration to 0, so it starts accumulating for the next sound;

```
*/
```

```

else {

    alege = Math.random() < 0.5 ? -1 : 1;

    startMoment = (1 / 10) * (1 + characterSet.indexOf(clape[i + alege]));

    playTone(i, startMoment, duration);

    if (lineDuration < startMoment + duration) {

        lineDuration = startMoment + duration;

    }

    duration = 0;

}

}

/* else, if the carracter in the i position is not ' ', add 0.2 sec to the duration; in this way,
each time we encounter a character other than ' ' the duration of the next sound increases with 0.2
sec. */

else {

    duration = duration + 0.2;

}

/* at this point i is updated to i + 1 and we go to the next iteration of the loop;
once i reaches 88, the for loop finishes;

*/

}

```

```
/* wait until the current line finishes, then play next 88 char line (call again the  
whatToPlay function);
```

```
    lineDuration * 1000 because lineDuration will be in seconds and this function expects  
the argument in milliseconds
```

```
    */  
  
    setTimeout(whatToPlay, lineDuration * 1000);  
  
    }  
  
}
```

```
/* this is the function that we call to actually play the sounds;
```

```
it receives from the calls located in the whatToPlay function the position of the ' ' (given by i),  
the startMoment and the duration. These parameters will be called inside this function osc, st, and  
dur;
```

```
*/  
  
function playTone(osc, st, dur) {
```

```
    //create a sine wave oscillator placed in the oscList array at the index number given by osc
```

```
    oscList[osc] = context.createOscillator();
```

```
    oscList[osc].type = "sine";
```

```
    /* give a smaller gain value for higher frequencies, a bigger gain value for lower  
frequencies, so the discrepancies in how loud we perceive the sounds are not too big;
```

```
    decrease the gain with setTargetAtTime before stoping the oscillator, to avoid the clicks that  
happen when the oscillator stops suddenly */
```

```
let noteGainNode = context.createGain();
```

```
if (osc >= 60) {
```

```
    noteGainNode.gain.value = .05;
```

```
    noteGainNode.gain.setTargetAtTime(0, context.currentTime + st + dur - 0.05, 0.015);
```

```
} else if (osc < 60 && osc >= 40) {
```

```
    noteGainNode.gain.value = .3;
```

```
    noteGainNode.gain.setTargetAtTime(0, context.currentTime + st + dur - 0.05, 0.015);
```

```
} else if (osc < 40) {
```

```
    noteGainNode.gain.value = .5;
```

```
    noteGainNode.gain.setTargetAtTime(0, context.currentTime + st + dur - 0.05, 0.015);
```

```
}
```

```
oscList[osc].connect(noteGainNode);
```

```
noteGainNode.connect(gainNode);
```

```
/* pass to the oscillator the corresponding frequency from freqList (calculated in the  
generateAudio function);
```

```
start the oscillator at current time + start moment of the sound;
```

```
stop the oscillator at current time + start moment + duration;
```

```
*/
```

```
oscList[osc].frequency.value = freqList[osc];
```

```
oscList[osc].start(context.currentTime + st);
```

```
oscList[osc].stop(context.currentTime + st + dur);
```

```
}
```

```
/*
```

+ - some unintended bugs in the code and differences in how specific browsers implement the

Web Audio, and you can hear the result;

```
*/
```

```
</script>
```

```
</body>
```

```
</html>
```



)

# Chapter I: Preliminary Formulation of the Problematic of Specta(c)torship

The aim of this chapter is to lay the foundations for the theoretical project of this book by sketching in a preliminary manner an understanding of specta(c)torship as a dynamic system of relations. This involves a change of perspective from an angle that privileges the figure of the individual, to an angle that accounts for the *being* and *becoming* of individuals as results of the systems of relations that shape them.

In order to establish this perspective, the chapter will first engage with Jussi Parikka's theory of embodied subjectivity in *Insect Media* (Parikka 2010) and subsequently develop a close reading of Gilles Deleuze's critique of the dogmatic image of thought (Deleuze [1968] 1993, 169-217). For Deleuze, thinking is driven by the encounter with the *sentientum* (the limit of sensibility) which disturbs the harmonious interplay of the faculties of thought, thus decentring the embodied subject and problematizing its unity and identity. I will argue in this context, that the problematic of specta(c)torship, closely interrelated with what Deleuze calls thinking, constitutes a (re)search for/into the *sentientum*, and consequently that it opens a crisis of identity. Crisis of identity means here the opening of a gap between the 'I' and the self, the impossibility of being who one is, the moment when one stops recognizing oneself in the embodied figure that hitherto identified oneself with, a gap that destabilizes embodied subjectivity. This process is strictly interlinked with the disturbance of the identity with themselves of the objects of perception—a is (not quite) a. Crisis of identity, then, refers to a moment when the embodied subject, disoriented, is at odds with its own embodiment, or at least with the body that it took itself to be. The chapter will propose that the embodied subject, opened beyond itself in a crisis of identity is a patient to the erring movements of

sense, where erring refers to the unteleological dynamic of the process of individuation.<sup>44</sup> This insight (that goes against Deleuze's understanding of error in *Difference and Repetition*) will provide the scaffolding for the theory of specta(c)torship as individuation that will be outlined in the following chapters. The most important aspect of this move will be the reformulation of the relationship between erring and the virtual problematic field (as understood by Deleuze)—building upon Sebastian Grama's *phenomenology of errancy* (Grama 2008). At the level of the embodied subject, this erring is reflected as 'dilation of time', waiting, boredom, weariness, which will bring us (parenthetically) to the methodological problematic of the possibility of writing about specta(c)torship and of researching specta(c)torship, as this problematic can be formulated following Blanchot's insights from *The Infinite Conversation*.

Inasmuch as thinking always happens in the collective, that is, inasmuch as the encounter with the *sentendum* is not a problematic that develops at the interior of the individual, but in the exteriority of the network of relations that shape the individual, we are bound to end the chapter by returning to our point of departure in the first pages of the book, namely to the question of the politics of

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<sup>44</sup> Questions of race, ethnicity, social position, sexuality, gender, disability etc. are all highly relevant for this problematic and a thorough examination of the concept of crisis of identity proposed here would imply an extensive discussion of all these issues. What I will be focussing on in the context of this project is only the simple misconception of the embodied subject as 'I myself' (a subject that is in a relationship of identity with its embodiment)—for a critique of this supposition from a related, yet sensibly different perspective cf. Massumi (2002)—, and the problematic identification of such embodied subjectivity as 'human'. This 'simple definition' of embodied subjectivity as 'I myself' is situated in a specific cultural paradigm (that we could call with Yuk Hui the *western cosmotechnics*), fraught with biases. I see its deconstruction as resonating with discourses that critically address the role of race, gender, sexuality, social position, etc. in the performance of embodied subjectivity. In this sense, I understand the relationship between the (de)construction of embodied subjectivity discussed here and the political problematic of identity along the lines proposed by Erin Manning (2020, 48-53).

specta(c)torship. In view of the theory of individuation, this political aspect becomes inherent to the process of specta(c)torship, and will have to be acknowledged at all stages of our discussion.

That being said, this chapter remains preliminary. It lays the foundation of a theoretical problematic that we will have to return to and to reformulate once we delve deeper into the experience of net art(?) specta(c)torship, which itself will propel us further into the intricacies of the theory of individuation.

### **I.1. The Embodied *Who* as a Field of Relations**

Common sense reduces specta(c)torship to a set of interactions between two terms that precede and determine the relations between them: an 'embodied human subject' and a 'work of art'—a subject and an object exterior with respect to the subject. Specta(c)torship, from this perspective, would be the three-fold problem of a *who* and its *relation* to a *what*, of a *subject* and its *relation* to an *object*.<sup>45</sup> As we saw in the *Introduction*, scholarship on net art(?) already problematizes the identity with itself of the work, and insists on the processuality of net art(?) as a practice interested in creating and critically inhabiting fields of relations, rather than in producing final objects. But how are we to understand the *who* and its field of *relations*? *Who* are we(?) the spectators?

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<sup>45</sup> Understanding the art(?)work as a mediation between two 'human' subjects (and thus specta(c)torship as relation between two or more embodied subjects through the art(?)work) is merely another version of this common sense assumption, and it does not change the problem significantly as long as the very individuality and identity of these embodied subjects is not questioned. Likewise, considering the process of specta(c)torship from the perspective of a community of spectators rather than from that of an individual spectator does not change the problem significantly if the community is understood as being composed of individuals that pre-exist their relations.

In *Insect Media: An Archaeology of Animals and Technology* (2010), Jussi Parikka deploys a Simondon-inspired approach to talk about bodies as (and of) media. I am appropriating and (mis)using Parikka's understanding of bodies and media in order to open up the possibility of understanding the problem of the individuals that are at stake in the process of specta(c)torship from a perspective that accounts for the reticulated space of their becoming—i.e. a perspective that accounts for the infinite mediation of the immediacy of the embodied self. Parikka develops his discourse around three key terms: intensities, assemblages, and diagrammatics. In order to grasp the problematic of embodiment, we have to pass through a brief discussion of this terminology.

*Intensity* is in *Insect Media*—following the meaning of the term as it appears in the work of Gilles Deleuze—the differing force of creation, the becoming that creates what we perceive (Parikka 2010, xxii). On the other hand, 'extension'—that which can be measured, delimited, defined, named—appears as an expression of the dynamics of intensive becomings. Parikka's point, inspired by the Deleuze, is that the being of individuals, of embodied subjects and objects, cannot be understood by attending to stable definitions and chains of causality, which would account only for their extension while obscuring the intensive field of their becoming (which is their being). A body is not formed of individual parts that supposedly come together as a whole, it is not a sum of organs, which is to say, it is not a problematic of *partes extra partes*; adding up the parts will never create the whole. And that is because in the first place there is no 'whole', there is no 'one' identical to itself, that exists in itself, and in the second place because there are no parts exterior to each other. The 'one' identical to itself and its parts, the chains of causal connections and their probabilities, are all very pertinent problems, but only as a matter of understanding the realm of extension. They cannot account for being, for a being that is always already becoming, that is always already a question of intensive dynamics, and that is merely expressed extensively inasmuch as its intensities are canceled in

qualities.<sup>46</sup> The ontological question becomes thus one of intensive becomings, or, as Simondon insists, in order to understand being we have to move from ontology to *ontogenesis* (Simondon [1958] 2013, 23-6).

The second movement in Parikka's framework is to describe *assemblages* as networks of connections between *intensive flows*. Assemblages are 'compositions, affects, and passages in a state of becoming and a relationality that is the stuff of experience' (Parikka 2010, xxiv-xxv). Intensities are conjugated in assemblages as the intensive field folds against itself recursively; the intensive flow differentiates itself (to use Deleuze's term) in dynamic patterns of asymmetric conglomerations and dissipations, accelerations and decelerations. Structures, affects, and passages emerge from this intensive relational field. Bodies, in this account, are an intensive relationality; a verb rather than a noun. Before the possibility of being defined, measured, and named with respect to their extensity, before the possibility of being described with respect to their qualities (the qualities appear only inasmuch as the intensities express themselves in extensity), bodies are specific kinds of assemblages, a conjugation of intensities that happens *in* a relational field and *as* a relational field. It is important to underline that bodies, as assemblages, are not something in themselves, they do not happen by virtue of an internal set of rules. That is, they are not autopoietic, but emerge only through relations that create the interior and the exterior, the '-poiesis' of intensive dynamic relations defines the very 'auto-' that comes to ground it from the beginning (that is from

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<sup>46</sup> On the relation between intensities and extensity see Deleuze, *Différence et répétition*, especially the chapter 'Synthèse asymétrique du sensible' (Deleuze [1968] 1993, 286-336).

the beginning as the *lack of origin*).<sup>47</sup> The being and becoming of bodies is not the question of an organism with its qualities and quantities, with organs and causal rules that govern their functioning, but a question of intensities, of coagulations of intensities deployed as dynamic relational fields. Which is not to say that the problematic of the organism is irrelevant, but rather to recognize the limits of its relevance: the organism in its extensity. To think the being and becoming of bodies, on the other hand, means to think against the organism, to open oneself to thinking as the miso-sophic practice of what Deleuze and Guattari call the body without organs.<sup>48</sup>

*Diagrammatics* denotes, for Parikka, the organization of a space of potential which limits what any assemblage can do and be (Parikka 2010, xxvii).<sup>49</sup> Since a body cannot be said to have any existence prior to the relations it enters into, the diagrammatics of its becoming (the topology of its potential becomings) depends on all the connections that it has with other nodes in the networks of relations that it emerges through, and, as Parikka insists, this means that *being* in its intensive *becoming* is contingent with respect to specific historical situations. It is the ensemble of relations and their dynamic that contour the terms of these relations. The individuals and the potentialities of their becomings, happen as relational nodes. We cannot speak of an 'embodied human subject' prior to the relations that it emerges from, and, moreover, the potentialities of its becoming are always

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<sup>47</sup> The absolute beginning as *lack of origin*, a theme that we will often come back to, is inspired by Derrida's discussion of the self-contradictory concept of *archi-trace* as the situated non-origin that becomes the origin of the origin. See (Derrida 1967, 90-92). The problematic of this original lack of origin will be formulated here from the perspective of individuation, and we will come back to Derrida, to the *arkhē* of the 'archive' (which I take to be nothing else but the *arkhē* of the *archi-trace* and *archi-writing*) in order to explore more specifically the movements of this folding of the trace into the ontogenetic origin. See *Chapter IV* below.

<sup>48</sup> More on *miso-sophy* below.

<sup>49</sup> Parikka borrows the term *diagrammatics* from Manuel Delanda's essay *Deleuze and the Use of the Genetic Algorithm in Architecture* (Delanda 2001).

part of this network of relations, including but not limited to specific historical situations, specific discursive practices and regimes of signification and so on. The diagrams that describe the potential becomings of a body are not to be found somewhere inside the body, but in the topology of dynamic relations that the body emerges from and that creates the inside and the outside. Also, they are not to be found as predefined blueprints, but as the very movement of individuation, as the vectors along which individuation unfolds. The directions of the becoming of a body are given by the *pre-individual* problematic that drives its becoming, but as the very movement of this problematic, not as an exterior telos. The phenomenological instantiation of this pre-individual problematic, the way in which it comes to be experienced by (and as) the individual, is the *associated milieu*,<sup>50</sup> at the very same time an interior and an exterior milieu.<sup>51</sup>

In this framework, bodies have to be accounted for in terms of the reticulated dynamic field that drives their emergence—the embodied 'human' subject included. The question of the reality of an individual body has to be asked in the light of the process of its emergence, that is, in the light of the process of individuation—the process by which individuals come to be what they (never quite) are, the process that continues to reshape the individual throughout its existence. The problematic of the embodied subject is thus not: *who* we (the spectators) are?, but: how are we happening? How come we are happening at all? What are the processes, what is the dynamic of relations, that subtends and defines the emergence of this individual? And what role does specta(c)torship play in this process?

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<sup>50</sup> The concepts of 'pre-individual' and 'associated milieu' will be clarified below in a close reading of Simondon's *L'Individuation à la Lumière des Notions de Forme et d'Information*. See subchapter III.2. *Pre-Individual Being, Individuation, and Individuated Being*.

<sup>51</sup> Which is to say that diagrammatics is primarily an eco-logical problem, a question asked towards an exterior/interior environment, a negotiation of the associated milieu.



But, is this framework pertinent? Is it more than a fiction? A critical reading of Gilbert Simondon's theory of individuation (starting in *Chapter III*) will allow us a better understanding of what is at stake in developing such a framework. Still, is it not the case that the embodied 'human' subject, even if a product of relations, is nonetheless well determined prior to the moment of specta(c)torship? Is not the body predefined with respect to specta(c)torship even if it is nothing but a node of relations? Has not the becoming 'human' of the body already reached its result in the embodied subject—is not the knot of relations (that the 'human' is) solid enough not to be undone by the emergence of a new thread (a specific instance of specta(c)torship)? The question of a possible undoing of the embodied 'human' subject in the process of specta(c)torship still appears at this point as utterly absurd.

As a bridge between these two slopes of the problem—first: is it possible to talk about the body as emerging in and from intensive relations?; and second: is specta(c)torship a process of individuation that produces an individual corporeality at odds with what we take to be an embodied 'human' subject?—emerges the question of perception.<sup>52</sup> What role does perception play with respect to diagrammatics?

In *Insect Media* the discussion of perception appears mostly in a chapter concerned with the technics—also read 'artificiality'—of nature and temporality.<sup>53</sup> With respect to perception Parikka

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<sup>52</sup> Why the question of perception? Because specta(c)torship, understood as a process that decentres representation from within, as a deconstruction of visibility from its inside, constitutes a problematization of the recognition that is at stake in perception. If it can be shown that perception plays an ongoing, integral part in the fields of relations through which 'human' bodies emerge (and we already saw hints in this direction in Parikka's framework), then the problematization of perception in specta(c)torship is also part of these relational fields that define the being and becoming of 'human' bodies.

<sup>53</sup> See *Insect Media*, Chapter 3: 'Technics of Nature and Temporality' (Parikka 2010, 57 - 83).

points in a few interconnected, while nonetheless distinct, directions: Uexküll, Whitehead, William James, Deleuze and Guattari, to name some of the dominant figures that are addressed. It is Bergson, though, that is acknowledged as the main interlocutor of the chapter, and it would make sense for our purpose to briefly look at Bergson's understanding of perception in *Matter and Memory* and fold it back into this framework borrowed from *Insect Media*.

The main point in Bergson's account is quite straight forward: perception is matter itself as it relates to the privileged image that is one's own<sup>(?)</sup> body. Perception is the ensemble of images, with respect to the possible actions of a certain specific image, a living body (a center of indetermination) (Bergson [1939] 2003, 13). Against the realist position that informs the quasi-entirety of scientific thought, Bergson maintains that matter is not something in itself that produces a representation within us, but a conglomeration of images. At the same time, against the idealist position, matter is not reduced to a representation. For Bergson, both idealism and realism are excessive and fail to think matter as an ensemble of images—images exist, in this account, midway between representations (favored by the idealist account) and things (favored by the realist account) (Bergson [1939] 2003, 5-6). In other words, matter exists as it is perceived, as images. The universe is an ensemble of images that react to each other according to certain rules, receiving and transmitting movement (Bergson [1939] 2003, 10). The living body emerges as an exception, as a set of images that defers its reaction to the images that surround it, and introduces a moment of indeterminacy in chains of interacting images. We ourselves, our own bodies, are such centers of indetermination, images that postpone their action. Perception emerges as a function of the possible action of my body upon the other images, the objects that surround my body reflect my possible actions upon them (Bergson [1939] 2003, 12). That is to say, the world as I perceive it is matter, images, ordered with respect to the potentialities of the image that I am, and not a representation of matter. As Anne Sauvagnargues puts it (naming 'moving image' what here I refer to simply as

'image'): 'the moving image is, strictly speaking, of the same order as matter and provides neither a secondary copy nor a psychic translation of it' (Sauvagnargues 2016, 54).<sup>54</sup>

If perception is matter with respect to the body (the center of indetermination), then the space of potential that articulates the possible becomings of any assemblage, has to do, at least in part, with the perceptive events that it is engaged in. In other words, if assemblages (including bodies, centers of indetermination) are in fact instances of relationality, as Parikka argues, and perception *is* this relational field (in its (im)materiality) referred to a given center of indetermination, then the diagrammatics that articulate the possible becomings of an assemblage, and in fact its very being, are related to the superimposed fields of perception at the intersection of which the respective assemblage emerges. Clarification: perception, following Bergson into Parikka's discourse, is not the representation of relationality but it is this relationality itself with respect to an assemblage which itself emerges through this relationality. Thus, differences in the space of perception are entangled with differences in becoming. Perceiving differently means becoming towards something different. Being perceived differently means becoming towards something different. The two

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<sup>54</sup> Sauvagnargues' text proposes that the 'image' is a process of individuation (against image as representation), following a critical engagement with Deleuze's reading of Bergson in *Cinema I*. In this context the individuation of the movement-image of cinema, and embodied perception are synonymous: 'The individuated-image emerges through a cinematographic mode, through editing and framing, folding and interiorisation. The finite perceptive image, whether it is technical-social or vital, emerges from infinite acented movement through the subtractive operation of vital framing. Perceiving, for a specific image – an organic body or a cinematographic machine, with no privilege accorded to the living or to the human – involves tracing a myopic diagonal across the other images' (Sauvagnargues 2016, 54-55). In light of the discussion in the subsequent chapters, I hesitate in equating the technical 'perceptive image' with the vital perceptive images. Nonetheless, the important point here is that perception constitutes a process of individuation, that cannot be severed from the individuation of matter (that is not simply a representation of a preexisting material reality).

formulations are actually the same because identity emerges as an eventual byproduct of this becoming, it is not there *a priori*. Parikka formulates a similar point when, while touching on trends in artificial intelligence, he nods towards the work of Jakob von Uexküll: 'artificial actors are embedded in a perceptual world, which implies that what we perceive is what we are, and animals and artificial agents are defined by the capabilities of perception, sensation, and orientation in their environment' (Parikka 2010, xii).<sup>55</sup> It should be added that not only 'what we perceive is what we are' but also, at the very same time, how we are perceived shapes what we are and what we perceive. Perception as a relational field creates its nodes just as much as it emerges from them, each center of indetermination (node) in this field of perception is continuously shaped by the multitude of its relations, each one of us is one, none and a hundred thousand. Which is simply to say, with Anne Sauvagnargues: '[p]erception is individuation', and not only the individuation of the thinking subject, but at the same time the individuation of matter (Sauvagnargues 2016, 53-57).

Therefore, diagrammatics refers to the structure of an intensive space of potentiality, which is shaped (in-formed) by the relationality that any event of perception is. The diagrammatic space of potentiality is shaped by perception, and further by recognition, understanding, *reading*. In this account, reading (the gesture of opening oneself up to the movement of *sense*), by virtue of its relation to perception, is deeply embedded in the intensive space of potentiality. *Reading* names here approximately what Bergson talks of as *conscious perception*: separating from the whole of matter (that is the whole ensemble of images) that which is relevant for a specific center of indetermination (Bergson [1939] 2003, 41), and in doing so, framing this center of indetermination. What this meaning of diagrammatics points towards is that the intensive becomings of assemblages

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<sup>55</sup> In light of the discussion in the subsequent chapters, I hesitate here too in equating the sensorial input of 'artificial agents' with perception. See below. Nonetheless, at this point in the text, this difference between Parikka's discourse and the position attempted here remains insignificant.

are at least in part a function of perception and, consequently, that they are not independent of meaning, of systems of signification, that they are not independent of the reading of their own traces.

If we take perception to be an integral element of the intensive relational fields that provoke and are provoked by bodies, then the possibility of understanding specta(c)torship as a process of individuation starts to gain some sense. Opening the problematic of perception means that the perspective we understand bodies from has to be accounted for as an element of the very bodies that we are trying to understand. Bodies are what they (never quite) are only from a specific perspective and that perspective is integral to what the respective bodies are. A reading cannot be neutral, cannot be universal, nor unique, and a body is what it (never quite) is only in a specific reading. And the process of specta(c)torship is an interplay of such readings folded against themselves, a problematization of perception from within, a folding of visibility (and of the system of representation based upon it) against itself, beyond itself.

Thus, one can start to ask: is it necessary that out of the many overlapping, contradictory and interrelated assemblages co-occurring in the superposition of heterogeneous fields of perception the ones traditionally understood (read) as 'human' bodies become conspicuous? Can the diagrammatic space associated with a process of specta(c)torship destabilize such readings? Does it still make sense to talk of an embodied 'human' subject independent of the work of art(?)? Is it still a question of subjects and objects, of *who* and *what*?

But, on the other hand, what does it mean to talk about individuation and to refuse to readily accept the premise of individuals that pre-exist their relations? Can we go so far as to refuse the 'one' identical to itself and consequently its necessary correlate, the eternal truth of the 'I' that thinks as a

unity present to itself? How can one<sup>(?)</sup> question this most basic logical proposition 'a is a', 'a = a', and dare to ask what is it that we uncritically presuppose in order to conserve this postulate of identity<sup>56</sup> as an indisputable truism? Is not this approach a mere fiction? Are not these far-fetched theories just dubious fruits of imagination?

Let us turn to Gilles Deleuze's miso-sophic project in *Difference and Repetition* in order to further unfold these questions in all their enthralling absurdity, and following Deleuze, in order to insist that, while thinking beyond identity might be impossible (outside the domain of the possible), nonetheless it is necessary—in fact, that thinking is thinking only inasmuch as it does go beyond identity (beyond 'I myself' and 'a is a').<sup>57</sup> This will also put us in the position of understanding the relation between specta(c)torship and thinking. Subsequently, after performing a critical intervention in the Deleuzian framework, the problematic of individuation will emerge from a new perspective (that will be further outlined in the following chapters) in which specta(c)torship will prove to play an essential part.

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<sup>56</sup> I insist that 'identity' here refers to the minimum condition for something being itself, 'I myself', 'a is a', the basic premise of seeing and of language, the possibility of seeing 'something' and of pointing to it, the possibility of saying 'I' and of having objects in the world. And this basic meaning of identity is strictly interrelated with the performance of embodied identity. In this sense, thinking beyond identity means thinking with discourses that problematize and reframe the meaning and performance of embodied identity.

<sup>57</sup> See the chapter 'L'Image de la pensée' in Gilles Deleuze, *Différence et Répétition* (Deleuze [1968] 1993, 169-217). In what follows, the references will be mostly to the French edition mentioned here, and only occasionally to the English translation of Paul Patton published by Columbia University Press (Deleuze [1968] 1994). Despite the high quality of the English translation, in several cases the nuances of the (mis)reading that I am attempting are easily lost in the English text. To give just one example, the translation of *bêtise* as 'stupidity' cannot account for the problem of the relation between what Gilbert Simondon calls vital and psychic individuation, which, I claim, is at stake in the respective paragraphs of Deleuze's text.

## I.2. Miso-sophy

The third chapter of Deleuze's *Difference and Repetition*, 'The Image of Thought', argues that there is something that philosophy always uncritically presupposes even when (or, especially when) it strives to question everything in search of a minimal truth that would allow the whole edifice of thought and knowledge to be built upon a stable foundation (Deleuze [1968] 1993, 169-217).

Deleuze contends that from Descartes to Hegel, and further to Heidegger, at the very moment when all the *objective* presuppositions of thought are questioned (everything that has to do with the reality of the world), there is a set of *subjective* presuppositions that remain taken for granted without being acknowledged—these subjective presuppositions are grounded, according to Deleuze, in the uncritical acceptance of the immediate givens of ('subjective') experience as preconditions of philosophical thinking (Deleuze [1968] 1993, 169-70). In Descartes, the subjective presuppositions become manifest as the belief in the reality of thought and of the self that thinks (a self that consequently discovers its reality as the primordial 'I think'). Everything can be doubted, except for the self, thinking, and being. Which is to say that objective presuppositions are reinstated on the subjective level of the thinking self that 'is' (Deleuze [1968] 1993, 169). What is it that allows Descartes to assume that the movement of thought happens for a self, wherefrom this form of identity? What is it that allows one to claim that thinking can intrinsically grasp its own movement? And what does 'being' mean? Deleuze argues that Hegel and Heidegger, while unsettling most of Descartes' assumptions, still reinstate, in different ways, the subjective presuppositions: Hegel inasmuch as the pure being presupposes the empirical being, sensible and concrete; Heidegger inasmuch as he invokes a pre-ontological understanding of Being (Deleuze [1968] 1993, 169). The whole system of representation, which is to say the understanding of the world as a system of individual unities that exist in themselves and relate with each other (and that one can *recognize*), hinges on these three intertwined assumptions: that we intrinsically know what thinking, being and

self mean, are, and do. Every time one of these subjective presuppositions is uncritically accepted, the objective ones are as well inadvertently restored.

Further, according to Deleuze, these three assumptions are informed by the propensity of thought to understand itself as a vector towards Truth, propensity which has in its turn two aspects: the assumption of the *good will of the thinker* and the *good* (upright, righteous) *nature of thought* (Deleuze [1968] 1993, 171, 173). In other words, the assumption that everybody naturally tends to follow the 'natural light' that reveals the Truth, or, that Truth is naturally revealing itself to us if we are not to err from the naturalness of this revelation. No matter how cumbersome and improbable such an achievement is *de facto*, it is intrinsically postulated in the system of representation (based on recognition) as the simple, natural being of thought *de jure* (Deleuze [1968] 1993, 173-4).

The miso-sophic gesture, that Deleuze proposes, is to reject in bad faith what 'everybody knows', to question the propensity of thought towards Truth, to fold thinking upon itself in bad will (miso-sophia instead of philo-sophia), to un-know what thinking is; to provoke thinking in thought, says Deleuze, not by starting from inside the system of thought but by following the contingent emergence of thinking from a sensible disturbance that cannot be assimilated in thought (Deleuze [1968] 1993, 180-2). In this sense, the subject is not the agent but the patient of thinking.

The recognition of an object (the first move of the system of representation) requires the convergence of the faculties of thought (perception, imagination, conceptual understanding, etc.) around the figure of the object supposed to be identical with itself. It is the identity with itself of the object that is the uncritically accepted presupposition of common sense ('everybody knows'), which 'the philosopher' will come to ground in the identity of the subject with itself (Descartes, Kant):



Recognition thus relies upon a subjective principle of collaboration of the faculties for 'everybody' - in other words, a common sense as a *concordia facultatum*; while simultaneously, for the philosopher, the form of identity in objects relies upon a ground in the unity of a thinking subject, of which all the other faculties must be modalities. This is the meaning of the Cogito as a beginning: it expresses the unity of all the faculties in the subject; it thereby expresses the possibility that all the faculties will relate to a form of object which reflects the subjective identity; it provides a philosophical concept for the presupposition of a common sense; it is the common sense become philosophical. For Kant as for Descartes, it is the identity of the Self in the 'I think' which grounds the harmony of all the faculties and their agreement on the form of a supposed Same object. (Deleuze [1968] 1994, 133)

The common sense existence of discrete objects (recognition) is explained philosophically as the convergence of the faculties of thought in the subject identical with itself. What remains unasked is: how come identity in the first place? Do we really live in a world of discrete individuals? Which brings us back to our main questions: is it possible to think without always already presupposing the 'a = a'? Is it possible to think against recognition and representation, without the sign of equality, in order to be able to account for its emergence?

In Deleuze's vocabulary the answer should be: it is not *possible*, but it is *necessary*. The domain of the possible is strictly linked with that of actuality,<sup>58</sup> of recognition, representation, and

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<sup>58</sup> This might be a bit counter-intuitive. Let us clarify: the conditions of possibility are related with extension (Deleuze [1968] 1993, 299), and with the principle of identity inherent in the concept (Deleuze [1968] 1993, 273), both aspects of the actual. One understands *becoming* as being driven by the possible only inasmuch as one confuses the actual (resulted from the actualization of the virtual) with the 'real' (or, in other words, inasmuch as one adopts an uncritical position with respect to the dogmatic image of thought).

philosophical concepts. From this perspective, thought without identity is properly speaking impossible. Nonetheless, there are events that provoke *thinking* in *thought* (Deleuze [1968] 1993, 182),<sup>59</sup> that force thinking to happen against thought itself—these events make necessary the impossible thinking against thought, thinking against identity, recognition, and representation. In this sense, thinking is a passion, thinking is not performed by the subject, but happens to the subject, and the subject, once opened to thinking, has no choice but to suffer it. Yet such an opening towards thinking is literally impossible, it is of the order of the event that arrives from outside of the domain of possibility. Thinking is a necessity that comes from the outside, more an affliction than a conscious deliberate gesture.<sup>60</sup>

Thinking emerges as a crisis in thought, as a dissonant (absurd) interplay of the faculties of thought. Instead of the convergence of the faculties towards the recognition of an object, in this case the faculties diverge and disturb each other. In Deleuze's formulation, in the first moment, the sensibility encounters the *sentiendum*—that which cannot be but sensed, yet that cannot be sensed under the rules of recognition (Deleuze [1968] 1993, 182). Which is to say, the sensibility is faced with waves of intensity that cannot be rendered back to anything else than what they (never quite) are, that cannot be recognized, and consequently, that cannot be grasped according to the laws of

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<sup>59</sup> I propose to distinguish between the two moments of thought that appear in *Différence et Répétition*, 'l'image d'une pensée qui se présuppose elle-même' and 'genèse de l'acte de penser dans la pensée même', (Deleuze [1968] 1993, 182) by referring to the first one as 'thought' and to the second one as 'thinking'.

<sup>60</sup> As Deleuze well knew, thinking is dangerous and can be prevented. Burn the books (or, the equivalent capitalist version, make them inaccessible under copyright laws), censor the internet, ban 'pornography', etc. and we will be safe with our healthy thought. The only problem is the extent to which our own becoming is dependent on the vectors of thinking, and the desolate dystopian landscape of societies who refuse thinking in the name of the known Truth, or harness it into a culture-industry that reproduces its own truths over and over again. Thinking brings with it an incommensurable danger, death; yet the refusal of thinking is nothing but a slow dying, withering, in the antiseptic environment that refuses any mutation, any change, any event.

common sense and good sense that govern the system of representation. The *sentiendum* appears as a problem, it provokes a violent crisis that brings into play the other faculties of thought as a dissonant interweaving along a chain of disturbances transmitted from one to the other (what Deleuze calls the 'Idea'), and not under the form of harmonious cooperation. The imagination, disturbed by the disturbance of sensibility, faces the *imaginandum*, that which cannot be empirically imagined, yet that which cannot be but imagined. The *imaginandum*, in its turn, brings memory into this dissonant interplay, but only memory inasmuch as it is that which cannot be but remembered, yet that which cannot be remembered empirically with respect to recognition and representation. This limit of memory, the *memorandum*, is not this or that instance remembered, but the possibility of memory as such, the being of the past, and the future, the pure form of time, an immemorial memory that is not mine, yet makes me who 'I' (never quite) am. And it is the 'I' fractured by the pure form of time of the *memorandum*, that throws reason into crisis, provoking in reason the *cogitandum*, that which cannot be but thought, yet which is not this or that concept, but the unthinkable that is the very condition of thought. In other words, thought is folded against itself in a movement that does not have anymore a principle of identity to stabilize it, that happens upon a fractured 'I' which cannot grant anymore the condition for the dissemination of sameness. Thinking emerges as the crisis of thought, a fractured 'I' that loses itself towards a perpetually unattainable otherness (Deleuze [1968] 1993, 180-191).

From this perspective, in order to account for a kind of thinking that is not subsumed to the dogmatic image of thought, one has to start from intensities that appear as a glitch in sensibility and to follow the twisted and broken chains of disturbances that they provoke in the messy and ill explored faculties of thought (Deleuze [1968] 1993, 186-7). Deleuze follows one such chain that proceeds from the sensed intensities, to stirring up the imagination as it tries to imagine the unimaginable, and further to memory as the being of the immemorial past and future that fractures

the 'I' that thinks and opens thought towards the unthinkable. Let us notice here that the discussion of the *sentiendum* (of that which cannot be perceived, yet cannot be but perceived) brings us in the proximity of the problematic of specta(c)torship as it was formulated above.

If thinking, in the Deleuzian sense, relies on the encounter with the *sentiendum*, specta(c)torship as a process of folding visibility against itself, a process of folding recognition against itself beyond representation, names an opening towards the *sentiendum* (and, consequently, towards thinking), and more than that, a (re)search for/into the *sentiendum*. Specta(c)torship means inhabiting the system of representation in such a way that one makes space for the *sentiendum* (for the unrecognizable intensity that cancels in sight and language) to happen. In this sense, specta(c)torship means waiting for the *sentiendum*, attending to its emergence. To be a spectator means opening oneself up to the experience of the incalculable *sentiendum* (opening oneself up to the (im)possibility of an experience that always comes from the outside, that cannot be actively provoked), and also, once one(?) encounters the *sentiendum*, specta(c)torship means deferring and differing the solutions that tend to coagulate in the movements of the problematic pre-individual field. Inasmuch as the *sentiendum* disturbs the harmonious interplay of the faculties of thought, and consequently the identity of the thinking subject with itself and the principle of identity that grounds the objects in the world ('a = a'), specta(c)torship as (re)search for/into the *sentiendum* means opening up a *crisis of identity*, also inhabiting and incarnating this *crisis*.

### **I.3. Erring**

Deleuze further probes into the intricacies of the question of thinking from the perspective of individuation (Deleuze [1968] 1993, 196-8), (that is, from the perspective of the process through which individuals and their individuality emerge) and argues that exploring the figure of *bêtise* (*stupidity/animality*), as opposed to that of *error*, can help us understand this folding of thinking

against thought. In his definition, *error* is simply a mistake of the cogito, something false that attests to the correctness and truth of the recognition and representation models (that it deviates from), and that, as such, reinforces the dogmatic image of thought. On the contrary, *bêtise* attests to the irruption in thinking, along the rims of the fractured 'I', of the intensive pre-individual problematic field. And, more precisely, it attests to the impossibility of reducing the pre-individual field to a system of individuals identical with themselves, to a system of forms.<sup>61</sup> It brings forth a paradoxical threshold in the process of psychic individuation (the process that accounts for the emergence of the thinking subject), namely the point where the individual becomes a thinking subject inasmuch as it discovers itself<sup>(?)</sup> as an object in the world, but as an object that fails to be identical with itself and that throws the world into crisis. The individual becomes a thinking subject by discovering itself as an open problem in the world, by leaving oneself behind (discovering oneself as not being identical with oneself), and in doing so gaining access to its pre-individual problematic field, the problematic field that any living individual carries with it (in fact, the very life of the individual is the continuous negotiation of its problematic field) and that disturbs the identity with themselves of objects in the world although it is the very ground upon which this identity coagulates in the first place. What our *bêtise* refers to is the impossibility of reducing the pre-individual field to a world of subjects and objects, and properly speaking is a characteristic of those individuals that reached this threshold of psychic individuation where they discover themselves as open problems upon the background problematic of the world, namely of the kind of individuals that we ourselves are.<sup>62</sup> To put it simply, from this perspective, the 'I myself' and 'a is

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<sup>61</sup> I am reading Deleuze's argument with the help of terms borrowed from Gilbert Simondon's theory of individuation, which is reworked by Deleuze in the passages from *Difference and Repetition* that are addressed here. The pre-individual is for Simondon the primary and original metastability of the real, before the formation of individuals (see below).

<sup>62</sup> For *bêtise* see (Deleuze [1968] 1993, 197-198, 207). Deviating from Deleuze, I do not see *bêtise* as a characteristic that would strictly distinguish between 'humans' and other animals.

a'—thinking subjects, objects and abstract unities—emerge in the world at the very same time that they are disturbed by the *bêtise* which attests to the remainder of pre-individual problematic that cannot be canceled in the system of representation (the system of subject, objects and abstract unities).

The pre-individual problematic field, that provokes thinking, cannot be empirically thought, yet cannot be but thought. It is the condition of every recognition, of every system of representation (that emerges as partial solutions to the pre-individual problematic), yet at the same time it provokes a disturbance of recognition and representation. Thus, the genesis of identity and consequently that of representation cannot be formulated from a thought predicated on identity, but only by thinking against thought. Thinking against thought, thinking beyond or before the figure of identity, destabilizes the system of representation (the world organized as subject-object relations) towards the *cogitandum* (the unthinkable that cannot be but thought), only in order to collapse back into representation, only in order to coagulate again around some form of identity which in its rigidity accounts for the *stupidity/animality* of thought, for its inherent incapacity to properly capture the flow of becoming of the pre-individual field that produces it. The question is then, what makes it possible to write and discuss about something that is necessarily outside the grasp of thought? What kind of access can language have towards the *cogitandum* that precedes and produces thought?

In the framework of *Difference and Repetition*, language, like all the other faculties of thought has its productive limit that cannot be empirically expressed in language, but that on the other hand cannot be but expressed: the *loquendum*, *sense* in its genitivity (that is, as a generative force) (Deleuze [1968] 1993, 200-1). Sense is an aspect of the disturbance that is transmitted from faculty

to faculty, that is, of the pre-individual problematic field that Deleuze calls the 'Idea'.<sup>63</sup> Sense, properly speaking, is this chain of unsolvable problems, of disturbances in the faculties of thought, inasmuch as they generate the thinking subject and its Nature as cancelations of the intensive problematic, as partial solutions, always unsatisfactory, to the intensive problematic that the world is. It is also that which opens the solutions back towards the intensive problematic. Sense is that which provokes the irruption of the pre-individual problematic (what Deleuze refers to as the 'Idea') in thought, against thought, while at the same time performing its cancelation into partial solutions (without which thought and life would not be possible). At the same time, as the *loquendum*, sense is the inexpressible possibility of expression, of language. Language and a world canceled in subjects and objects are the two intertwined products of sense, hence the potentiality of language to (always inadequately) account for the cancelation of thinking that it results from and for the Nature that coagulates in the same process.<sup>64</sup> Sense insists and persists in the partial solutions that it produces and that at the same time determine it—the problem is determined at the same time as it is covered by its solutions (Deleuze [1968] 1993, 212). This insistence and persistence of sense (in the solutions that it produces and that at the same time determine it) accounts for the potentiality of language to fold against itself, to open itself towards genital sense and, in doing so, to provoke thinking in thought, while at the same time being utterly unable to account to any satisfactory degree for the thinking that it occasions. The insistence and persistence of sense in its partial solutions (/partial failures), along with the necessary emergence of non-sense (the problematic of *bêtise*, that of the inconsistency, crookedness, malformation of these partial solutions with respect to

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<sup>63</sup> For the relation between sense and Idea see (Deleuze [1968] 1993, 201, 210-211).

<sup>64</sup> For a reworking of this relation between the world in its materiality, language and thought (and thinking against thought) see the problematic of *phenomenogenesis* in the following chapters.

each other as a result of their very partiality with respect to the problematic field)<sup>65</sup> offer the actual opportunity of the miso-sophic gesture.

If *bêtise* is understood as a challenge towards the dogmatic image of thought, *error*, on the other hand, is in *Difference and Repetition* synonymous with a mistake in thought that reinforces this image—a misstep that confirms the existence of a correct path. I propose a different meaning of error here, in order to rethink this Deleuzian framework. *Erring* refers here to the non-teleological movement of the process of individuation, while *errors* are the always partial and relative results of this process. Erring is a movement without a stable direction and without a goal that could orient it, without a goal that could foretell its direction, without a goal that could ground the distinction of the right and the wrong. From the perspective of the embodied thinking subject, sense is erring<sup>66</sup> (where sense, following Deleuze, is an aspect of the disturbance transmitted from faculty to faculty): sense, through the dis-harmonious (absurd) interplay of the faculties that it provokes, constructs and deconstructs (as errors) the embodied subject, its world (canceled in objects), and language.

The process of specta(c)torship is opening the embodied subject against itself (and against the possibility of an *a priori* principle of identity) in a crisis of identity as a patient to the (im)material erring of sense—miso-sophic thinking, thinking against thought, against representation and recognition, follows in the traces of this erring, it is thinking driven by the movement of sense. Or, in a vocabulary pertinent to Deleuze and Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus*, the process of specta(c)torship is a *line of flight* that opens the embodied subject towards the body without organs,

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<sup>65</sup> I am taking the understanding of 'non-sense' as it can be inferred from (Deleuze [1968] 1993, 268). It is a question to what extent this understanding is consistent throughout *Difference and Repetition*, and further if it is or not equivalent with that proposed in *The Logic of Sense*.

<sup>66</sup> But also, we will see, specific dynamics of sense (specific intensive fields and vectors that drive their cancelation towards representation) emerge through the erring of phenomenogenesis.



while at the very same time, impossibly yet necessarily, this line of flight can come to happen only on the surface of the body without organs whose prerequisite it is. Erring towards and against the body without organs as a body without organs that will have always already been canceled in the figure of the embodied subject that one<sup>(?)</sup> (never quite) is—a body without organs understood as a practice (a practice of the active/passive (de)construction of the embodied thinking self).

More exactly, following (somewhat unfaithfully) Sebastian Grama's 'phenomenology of errancy' ('fenomenologie a eranței'), erring is a figure of the labyrinthine emergence of the labyrinth, that is, of the labyrinthine emergence of *the problem* (Grama 2008, 14). The problem emerges in erring, yet erring always already happens 'in' a problematic field (that is, in and through the diagrammatic topology of one's<sup>(?)</sup> becoming). Except that the very possibility of interiority and exteriority (one's<sup>(?)</sup> becoming) emerges through erring, through the creation of the problem and its subsequent differentiation, and not as a precondition, which is to say, with Grama, that the paradox of the 'always already' delays infinitely the opposition between the interior and the exterior (Grama 2008, 14). That is, it differs and defers the emergence of identity. With Deleuze, sense is in the problem itself (Deleuze [1968] 1993, 204), but we have to underline that the problem itself—which is nothing but the Idea, problems are Ideas (Deleuze [1968] 1993, 210-1)—emerges in the erring of sense.

For the embodied subject, erring is affect, *ek-stasis* (Grama 2008, 38), being thrown towards the outside, re-moved from oneself towards oneself<sup>(?)</sup>.<sup>67</sup> Disequilibrium? No, probably not. Rather an

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<sup>67</sup> Grama's argument is that *erring/errancy* ('eranța') can be understood as emotion. Here I prefer 'affect' instead of 'emotion' in order to remain consistent with a terminology that differentiates between 'emotion' always linked to an embodied subject and 'affect' as a figure of the intensive relationality that at once decentres and produces the embodied subject. For the distinction between emotion and affect see (Massumi 2002, 27-28).

non-probabilistic dynamic passage between a metastable equilibrium (a pre-individual problematic)—the erring is always unfolding upon a problematic field—and a stable solution (the individual, the 'one' that one<sup>(?)</sup> (never quite) comes to be). The dynamic of a relational field that at once decentres the individual and constitutes the very possibility of individuality. A body without organs fleeing from identity, always on the point of collapsing into identity.

Erring unfolds as *différance* of the imminent solution, that is, as differed and deferred equilibrium, as differed and deferred identity, and this incessant prolongation of imminence is *the labyrinth* itself (see Grama 2008, 39-40)—i.e. the problem, the Idea in the Deleuzian vocabulary. The virtual problematic plane (or at least its structure), emerges in the intensive affective dynamic of erring, in the movement of sense that (de)constructs embodied subjectivity—a movement of sense that is nothing but the very dynamic of the problematic that it generates. The self is the imminent solution, the self is always an other that is always already there to be reached in the next step, after the next corner of the labyrinth, always after the next one, as Grama underlines. Infinitely close because it is infinitely distant.<sup>68</sup>

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Because it is an endless deferral, erring is intimately related (when we pass from the register of unnamable affects to that of the emotions of an embodied subject) to a 'dilation of time' in waiting (Grama 2008, 40), thus to boredom and weariness. 'It is weariness that makes me speak', says one of the characters from the fictional dialogue that opens Blanchot's *The Infinite Conversation* (Blanchot [1969] 1993, xvii), a speech that is always already writing (Blanchot [1969] 1993, 27-8),

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<sup>68</sup> The problematic of the embodied self will be further unpacked in the subsequent chapters as the conjunction of the ontogenetic and phenomenogenetic dimensions of individuation.

a writing, an erring that encircles (encloses, contours, defines) one<sup>(?)</sup> into being who one<sup>(?)</sup> can never quite be (the movement of sense):

He recalls in what circumstances the circle was traced as though around him—a circle: rather, the absence of a circle, the rupture of that vast circumference from which come the days and nights.

Of this other circle, he knows only that he is not enclosed within it, and, in any case, that he is not enclosed in it with himself. On the contrary, the circle being traced—he forgets to say that the line is only beginning—does not allow him to include himself within it. It is an uninterrupted line that inscribes itself while interrupting itself.

[...]

Be this circle—the absence of a circle—traced by writing or by weariness; weariness will not permit him to decide, even if it is only through writing that he discovers himself weary, entering the circle of weariness—entering, as in a circle, into weariness.

(Blanchot [1969] 1993, xviii)

And, following Blanchot, this erring in boredom and weariness ('Speaking is the speech of the waiting wherein things are turned back toward latency. Waiting: the space of detour without digression, of errancy without error' (Blanchot [1969] 1993, 31))—re-moved from oneself towards oneself<sup>(?)</sup> as the other, always imminent, always unreachable—is the movement of *research* inasmuch as the research has the impertinent audacity to question the form that it borrows from tradition (See Blanchot [1969] 1993, 3-32, especially 26)—a necessary questioning once it becomes clear that '[t]he unknown that is at stake in research is neither an object nor a subject' (Blanchot

[1969] 1993, 6), once it is clear that there is a fundamental break, an outside, inherent in writing, a discontinuity that writing as research has the task of letting transpire (Blanchot [1969] 1993, 7-8).  
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In the following chapters, by considering in more detail the problematic of individuation, the Deleuzian structure sketched above will end up being modified in some of its fundamental aspects, and the reframing of the meaning of error will be significant in doing so. Nonetheless, for now, the reformulation of the questions of thinking with respect to the problem of identity, as it appears in *Difference and Repetition*, does help not only to delineate the impossibility/necessity of thinking outside of a paradigm predicated on predefined individuals (subjects and objects), but also to open up the main directions of the problematic of individuation. What is at stake in miso-sophic thinking (in a kind of thinking that dynamically turns against itself problematizing its 'philia' for truth), is the impossibility/necessity of opening oneself up beyond the *a priori* character of the equal sign of 'a = a'. That is, opening oneself up towards a thinking that does not give to itself by default a principle of identity, and that consequently would lack both the form of a stable object and that of a stable subject. Given the close interdependency between the propensity of thinking towards truth, the form

of identity in the object and the thinking subject identical with itself, the destabilization of identity results in a more generalized crisis of representation.<sup>69</sup>

Following Deleuze, this section pointed out that the impossibility/necessity of thinking against thought (of provoking the erring dynamics of sense) relies on the contingent encounter with a *sentiendum*—the encounter with un-recognizable affect. In this sense specta(c)torship is the (re)search for/into the *sentiendum*. Thus, perception (and the folding of perception against itself) plays an essential role with respect to the dynamics of the diagrammatic fields of potentiality that structure the becoming of the individual (the claim formulated above with respect to Parikka's framework from *Insect Media*): now this problematic folding of perception against itself appears (more exactly) as the erring movements of sense upon a problematic field, movements through which the problematic field is constructed.

At the same time, by repeatedly claiming that thinking in and against thought relies on a miso-sophic gesture, this section also insist that the impossibility/necessity of encountering the *sentiendum*—and thus the impossibility/necessity of thinking—depends on a specific negotiation of the field of thought and of its relation to the world and to language. Which brings to the fore the fact

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<sup>69</sup> The rather widespread attempt to rethink embodied subjectivity and to open it up to its multiplicity, while at the same time retaining a belief in the objectivity of the world thought by embodied subjectivities (namely the belief in the objectivity of matter) is merely a philosophical blunder. The same philosophical blunder that these very attempts are warning against: forgetting the body that thinks (or that thought happens for) and its circumstances (the limitations that define it)—that is, forgetting the fact that thought is not an objective actuality that tends towards an objective truth. Likewise, rethinking the objective reality in its materiality and understanding it towards its dynamic becoming, towards the intensive fields that produce it, if it does not question embodied subjectivity and thinking itself, it forecloses its own process and misrepresents its consequences.

that thinking is situated with respect to paradigms of thought and knowledge—resonating with Parikka’s claim that the diagrammatic space of potentiality is historically contingent (Parikka 2010, xxvii). This historical contingency of the impossibility/necessity of thinking beyond the figure of the individual foregrounds the inherent political aspect of thinking specta(c)torship as a process of individuation. The last section of this chapter will briefly touch on this political problematic in a preliminary manner (we will come back to this question in the later chapters, once it becomes possible to address it from the perspective of the theory of individuation, namely after formulating the problematic of the transindividual collective).

#### **I.4. The Politics of Specta(c)torship**

Theatre director and political activist Augusto Boal coined the term *spect-actor* in order to emphasize a new spectrum of possible interactions between actors and spectators with the accent on the interchangeability of these roles and the political consequences of liberating the spectator from what Boal considered to be its passive state. In the participatory theatre forms that he developed, Boal regarded the stage as the place where the spect-actors would rehearse the fight for liberation which is later to become real (Boal 2008, xxi).<sup>70</sup> The spectator is to become an actor on stage in order to break free from the spell of *catharsis*—for Boal *catharsis*, as purification, is the purgation of the will to fight against the oppressive status quo (Boal 2008, 31-34, 40-42) —, and, by doing so, in order to take steps towards assuming political agency. Failing to become a spect-actor means remaining trapped in an oppressive power system.

I take Boal’s argument to be representative of the widespread push towards participatory art<sup>(?)</sup> practices as forms of empowerment, which is reflected in the theory surrounding net art<sup>(?)</sup> by the

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<sup>70</sup> I am referring to Augusto Boal’s ‘Preface to the 2000 Edition’ for *Theatre of the Oppressed*, Pluto Press, 2008, p. xxi.

replacement of the concept of spectator with those of 'user', 'interactor', of 'inter-acteur' among others<sup>71</sup>: spectatorship is a form of passivity, and transforming the spectator into actant is an act of empowering that will hopefully have immediate political consequences. The (c) of specta(c)torship, inspired by Boal's term, acknowledges this position and its relevance. But, we should not forget, following the ancient Chinese story of Bo Ya and Zhong Ziqi, that political power relies on the privilege and responsibility to listen, to practice non-action. Boal's spect-actor, and other theories and practices that try to dislodge the spectator from its 'passivity', are also to an important extent disempowering, exactly because the spectator is deprived of its political power by being forced into action.

But the problem is more complicated than that. The active passivity of specta(c)torship is not merely a question of empowerment and disempowerment of individuals, but also that of the serious danger of the crisis of identity. Opening oneself to the risks of specta(c)torship means letting go, putting one's individuality into crisis, making space for art(?) and politics to happen by displacing oneself (oneself → oneself(?)). And, at the same time, it means failing to do so, ending up being oneself as a failure. It is a question of inscribing oneself(?) in a relational dynamic that endlessly oscillates between activity and passivity, between what Bergson called the centrifugal and centripetal forces at play in any center of indetermination, except that the center itself is decentered and loses itself in these movements. Specta(c)torship is, in this sense, a vector of the body without organs, successive deterritorialization and reterritorialization movements that decenter the subject, its world and the system of signification that grounds them.

A spectator is not a consumer; and being a spectator is not the form of a shameful political passivity that has to be surpassed by blurring the dividing lines between actors and spectators. On the

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<sup>71</sup> See above.

contrary, specta(c)torship is a crucial political process. Jacques Rancière in *The emancipated spectator* frames specta(c)torship as a modality of disturbing the distribution of the sensible, and thus as an essentially political gesture inasmuch as it modifies the regimes of sensibility that politics rely upon, opening up the potentiality for the coagulation of new political vectors (Rancière 2008, 23-5). The distribution of the sensible, 'the system of self-evident facts of sense perception that simultaneously discloses the existence of something in common and the delimitations that define the respective parts and positions within it' (Rancière 2006, 12), is for Rancière the basis of any politics. The distribution of the sensible is an intrinsic political dimension of any art(?) form, before any specific political program that a particular art(?)work might engage with. Rancière develops an understanding of politics as conditions of, and conditioned by, *aisthesis*—following the greek meaning of the term, *aisthesis* is the given of the senses. Inasmuch as it operates in the space of aesthetics, art(?) is in the position of disturbing politics by challenging the aesthetic regimes that ground a specific political system and that are imposed by it: that is, literally, art(?) is perturbing the regimes of the sensible.

This formulation of politics with respect to *aisthesis*, with respect to a domain generally theorized as the realm of art(?), upsets the relation between art(?) and politics. Art(?) is, in this view, intrinsically political, and by virtue of its privileged relation to *aisthetis* is more immediately so than politics itself. Moreover, it is specta(c)torship as a problematization of *aisthesis* (as research for/into the *sentendum* that is attending to the limits of sensibility) in art(?) that could be seen as the cornerstone of the political gesture.<sup>72</sup> Art(?) specta(c)torship as problematization of *aisthesis* is the problematization of the sensible itself (of the emergence of the sensible as sensible). It is the whole phenomenal world that is called into question when the prevalent regimes of the sensible are

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<sup>72</sup> I do not claim that Rancière himself necessarily goes this far, but that this is a possible reading of the framework developed in *Le spectateur émancipé*.



destabilized. What is at stake in the aimless erring of specta(c)torship (as in the always already correct political-legal norms) is the phenomenal world itself and the embodied subject as a function of the phenomenal world.

And yet...

A spectator is a consumer; and being a spectator is the form of a shameful political passivity that has to be surpassed by blurring the dividing lines between actors and spectators. In the actuality of the present, specta(c)torship is indistinguishable from consumerism. There is nothing to measure and construct a border between the two. It is a question of intensities that pass or do not pass, and that is a problem that, in the realm of measurable extensity, remains veiled. The consequences can be (sometimes) measured, but that is always too late. Moreover, specta(c)torship as a push into a deterritorializing flow has to eventually fail into a territorialization, into the affirmation of an individual, and to a certain extent into the affirmation of the very individual that it strives to leave behind; specta(c)torship always keeps a bit of the subject, a bit of the organism, a bit of the system of signification that it flees from. Which is also to say that specta(c)torship ends up being always to some extent specta©torship, mere consumerism, and thus impotent obedience to an oppressive politico-economic system.

As it is often the case with such apparently irreconcilable positions, these two seemingly opposite understandings of specta(c)torship (one pointing towards Ranciere's distribution of the sensible, the other towards Boal's spect-actor) are not excluding each other but, on the contrary, are mutually dependent. In both cases, the question is that of surpassing the deadlock of an oppressive political system, through a practice of specta(c)torship. The particularities of this practice seem divergent, maybe even opposite at first, but prolonged beyond the intentions of their authors, they converge

towards the eminently political problematic of the construction of the embodied subject and of its associated milieu (the world). We will have the opportunity to come back to the contradictory politics of specta(c)torship and their point of convergence. What is important here is to note that there is an implicit political dimension to specta(c)torship, and that it is directly related with the problematic of the emergence of the individual. Also, the obvious and yet impossible distinction between specta(c)torship as movement outside of oneself, and consumerism as reaffirmation of the self, emerges as a background element that permeates this text.

## Chapter II: The <strike>Human</strike> Body

After setting up above a preliminary understanding of specta(c)torship and of its relation to embodied thinking, the purpose of this chapter is to address the problematic of the 'human' body, through a process of specta(c)torship, starting from a (mis)reading of Jonas Lund's work *We See In Every Direction* (2013)—a web browser for collaborative, collective, synchronized surfing where '[u]sers can type, click and change URLs in real time together'.<sup>73</sup> This chapter proposes to understand *We See In Every Direction* as field of relations and discusses what is at stake in the dynamics of this field, a discussion which leads to a reconceptualization of the figure of the modern 'human' embodied subject and of the conditions of its emergence.

It should be emphasized from the beginning that this is not an attempt to interpret a work of art<sup>(?)</sup>, to reveal its deeper meaning, nor to uncover the artist's intentions or any other kind of hidden layers. Here, *reading* does not mean revealing, but rather following impulses inherent in an encounter away from it: letting (oneself<sup>(?)</sup>) go, departing, leaving behind. Erring. Being affected. Following the traces left on (/as) one's own<sup>(?)</sup> body by the encounter that the work proposes (by the encounter that the work *is*) and that never quite happens. As for the work 'itself', it will remain just as puzzling as it was prior to this reading gesture, or even more so.

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<sup>73</sup> *We See In Every Direction* could be downloaded from: <http://ineverydirection.net>, last accessed 04.02.2021. Presently the link is broken. Images, a short video documentation, as well as a succinct description of the work can be found on Jonas Lund's website: <https://jonaslund.com/works/we-see-in-every-direction/>.

## II.1. Download

Everything starts with a download button. *We See In Every Direction* cannot be directly accessed online, but instead requires the spectators to download it and run it on their own computers. Hence our first question: how does the download gesture affect the subsequent experience of engaging with the work? To download means to open up a complex mesh of technological, but also social, economic and political questions, and these questions permeate the downloadable work even when they are not thematized explicitly (cf. Soulellis 2015). *We See In Every Direction*, far from being an isolated example in playfully opening up these questions, is rather inscribed in a rich field of downloadable net art<sup>(?)</sup>—a fact underscored by its inclusion in [rhizome.org](http://rhizome.org)'s curated program *The Download* (2011-2013 and 2015-2018).<sup>74</sup> A quick, fragmentary glance at other works in this field could give us a starting point for considering the problematic that is at stake in the gesture of downloading.

### *Fragment 1*

We find in the second part of *The Download* series, for example, Christopher Clary's 2015 audacious and irreverent work *sorry to dump you like this.zip*, a set of narratives presenting intimate love stories between men, stories that emerge out of the titles of a large collection of porn .jpg images when sorted by date. According to the curatorial text, the images are the artist's own porn collection accumulated in fifteen years of web browsing (Soulellis 2015). Overstepping the boundary of what is acceptable in contemporary society with respect to the exhibition of sex and sexuality, and opening the thorny political problem of pornography by challenging the prudishness

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<sup>74</sup> There are two different series entitled *The Download* on Rhizome's websites. *We See In Every Direction*, along with the other works from the first part of *The Download* (2011-2013, curated by Zoë Salditch) can be found here: <http://classic.rhizome.org/the-download/>, accessed 02.09.2018. Another set of works, the second part of *The Download* (2015-2018, curated by Paul Soulellis), are available at: <http://rhizome.org/download/#about>, accessed 02.09.2018.

which still prevails in mainstream online environments, *sorry to dump you like this.zip* offers itself as a distributed experience, at once personal and collective, that builds upon a specific type of sexualized embodiment made possible by online porn sites and sex chat rooms.<sup>75</sup> The broken narrative that gains shape as the spectator browses (reads) through the pictures in chronological order, and its nonlinear yet relevant variations that emerge when the collection is browsed according to other principles, structure the personal/impersonal porn archive and transform it into a provocative socio-political experience. Provocative inasmuch as it is pornography, provocative inasmuch as it challenges the sanctioned narratives of mainstream love stories, provocative inasmuch as it challenges the form of the narrative as such, also provocative inasmuch as it is downloadable—that is, inasmuch as it is experienced in a weird private yet collective mode. This problematic folding of the private and the collective, so stringent in this work—highlighted by the uneasiness of engaging in private (on one’s computer... is it a private space?) with a narrative that unfolds in a private porn collection (private collection of pictures downloaded from the public space) made public as a downloadable art(?)work—, emerges as a first clue in answering our question.

## *Fragment 2*

The second part of *The Download* also features Sheida Soleimani’s *to oblivion.zip* (2017), an emotionally devastating tribute to Reyhaneh Jabbari who was convicted and hanged in 2014 for the alleged murder of her rapist. The work, organized as an arborescent structure of folders within folders, contains execution records, images of Jabbari and other prisoners as well as letters and

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<sup>75</sup> I am not arguing for overlooking the ethical challenges of pornography, but pointing out that pornography can be at times a vector that destabilizes systems of representation (based on visibility) and their repressive politics and can function as a vector of affirmation for embodied desire against commodified, antiseptic images of the body. Cf. in this sense (Marks 2016, 1-20).

journal pages written by Jabbari (Soulellis 2017). The titles of the folders form a minimal narrative composed of only a few sentences—the beginning reads: 'I\_am\_Reyhaneh\_Jabbari', 'and\_am\_26\_years old', 'I\_confess\_that\_I', 'am\_no\_longer\_willing', 'to\_continue\_this way\_of\_life'. This private/public distributed memorial to the tragedy of a young woman intensifies, to almost unbearable levels, the emotional (/affective) charge inherent in the specta(c)torial gesture. It is because of its private dimension that the work requires an immediate personal involvement from the spectator, an act of mourning, as well as of tending and caring for the fragile monumentality of the memorial. How is one supposed to act with respect to such a work? What kind of mourning ritual is this work requiring? How to store this work? How to care for it? Should one further distribute it?

These are all urgent and immediate questions, and already inherently political—private yet concerning the public space and the power relations inherent in it. Nonetheless, claiming that the attitude of the spectator with respect to the work is inherently political is not to say that this political gesture is sufficient for redeeming one's responsibility towards Jabbari, and neither that it is sufficient for enacting much needed socio-political change. The political aspect of engaging with this work ends up being a foregrounding of an incommensurable responsibility through its very failure. *to oblivion.zip* points towards a kind of politics that cannot be equated with conflicts between nation states, between social classes or with 'soft power' clashes, but only with a necessary opening (always aware of its own failure) towards *networks of care*.<sup>76</sup> It is the imperative responsibility towards the other, in all the immensity of its impossibility, that affirms itself through the questions that *to oblivion.zip* raises. Inasmuch as, in all its privacy, this is a freely downloadable work disseminated through the technological network, it raises these problems at a collective level, with the same insistence that public statues and strike banners do, and with the same public urgency.

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<sup>76</sup> For *networks of care* see (Dekker 2018). I discuss this concept further in *Chapter IV: Archives and Individuation*.

It is a whole socio-political crisis that propagates in the distributed collectivity coagulated around the private attitude of each spectator towards this work.

*Speculatively extending fragments 1 and 2*

*Fragments 1 and 2* underline the challenges that *to oblivion.zip*, and on another level *sorry to dump you like this.zip*, raise for the socio-political systems that they are embedded in, while stepping back and leaving the work of mourning, and that of love, to follow their course in the inexpressible singularity of the processes of specta(c)torship that open through these works.<sup>77</sup> The question here is merely (again): what is at stake in the gesture of downloading a net art(?) work? We start to glimpse that the distributed being of these works involves a peculiar folding of public and private (cf. Soulellis 2015) that opens as a socio-political crisis.

But what gives us the right to generalize this discussion of two particular works to all downloadable net art(?). (And thus to contend that it is relevant for *We See In Every Direction*). The claim here is that these two examples (and the ones that follow below) help highlighting affordances of downloadable works, such as the folding of private and public space inherent in the download and the socio-political crisis opened by this folding. These are not traits specific to *to oblivion.zip* and *sorry to dump you like this.zip*, what is particular is rather the urgency with which this problematic inherent in the download presents itself in the process of specta(c)torship in these two cases. (Hence the relevance of the chosen examples).

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<sup>77</sup> I strongly encourage the reader to pause and take the time to engage with the works mentioned in this text, and, unavoidably, to read them in terms different from the ones that I propose. There is no shortcut to specta(c)torship, a critical reading gesture, such as the one attempted here, is not meant to elucidate the works and neither to frame the specta(c)torial encounter, but on the contrary is itself nothing but a partial and erroneous path provoked by impulses inherent in such a process of specta(c)torship.

### Fragment 3

Stepping away from Rhizome's *The Download*, another landmark collection of downloadable *net art*<sup>(?)</sup> is *runme.org*, a historically significant repository for *software art*, active since 2003—at the time of this writing new projects are still added sporadically.<sup>78</sup> Controversially, *runme.org* also included in their repository 'found digital objects', intriguing pieces of code found on the internet, thus questioning the authority of the definitions utilized in the art-world (raising the 'art' of the institutional 'art-world' to the power of the parenthetical question mark: art<sup>(?)</sup>) and also problematizing the established rules of property and copyright.

Probably one of the most spectacular examples of pieces found through internet browsing and linked on *runme.org* is *Tempest for Eliza* (2001) by Erik Thiele,<sup>79</sup> a software that uses the computer monitor to send out AM radio signals that, if picked up by a close-by radio receiver, produce a rendering of Beethoven's *Für Elise*.<sup>80</sup> The project exploits the leaked electro-magnetic waves of digital devices. TEMPEST (Telecommunications Electronics Materials Protected from Emanating Spurious Transmissions) is the acronym for a U.S. government (and now NATO) specification regarding spying on information systems through leaking emanations, including unintentional radio or electrical signals.<sup>81</sup> Erik Thiele in *TEMPEST for Eliza* playfully uses the technical insights from publicly available materials regarding this specification in order to write a software that creates a

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<sup>78</sup> Runme.org's core team included Alexei Shulgin, Olga Goriunova, Amy Alexander, and Alex McLean but it also relied on the frequent contributions of a larger group of experts and non-experts, the platform can be accessed at: [runme.org](http://runme.org), accessed 02.09.2018. The archive is still online, many of the works can still be downloaded, but running them can be a complicated task given the differences between the software and hardware architecture of present day computers and those that the works were created for.

<sup>79</sup> See a discussion of this work in the context of *runme.org* in Goriunova 2012, 85-86.

<sup>80</sup> Presentation text and download links for *Tempest for Eliza* by Erik Thiele, on Runme.org, <http://runme.org/project/+tempest/>, accessed 07.11.2018.

<sup>81</sup> See Alexei Shulgin's introductory text for the work on *runme.org* (Shulgin 2003).



series of images on the computer monitor such that there is a specific pattern to the radio-waves leaked by the monitor. If picked up by a close by radio-receiver, these leaked radio-waves are rendered as a sound pattern that is recognizable as *Für Elise*. Playfully commenting on TEMPEST, Thiele's project has an unmistakable political tint, without directly presenting itself as a political gesture. It performs a folding of a specific technology upon itself in a way not intended by its producers, a folding that has the potentiality to reveal in a strange light not only the black-boxed inner workings of technological equipment but also the socio-political shades inherent in such workings and their exploitation. In particular, the work engages with questions regarding property over digital information, the individual and political stakes of gaining control/disturbing the control over such property, but also with disregarded leakages, unintended side-effects and their role in political power dynamics.

Downloading Thiele's program places the spectator into a gray socio-political and legal arena in which questions of electronic privacy, information exploitation, and structures of power with respect to electronic information open up through the gesture of playing the technology against itself. The disruptiveness of this work, and of the gestures of specta(c)torship that the work makes possible and requires, resides in its potential to split open the seemingly monolithic technological object and the homogenizing socio-political context in which it exists (and that it creates) as, what Matthew Fuller calls, a *media ecology*, where ecology designates a 'massive and dynamic interrelation of processes and objects, beings and things, patterns and matter' (Fuller 2005, 2). What becomes conspicuous is the intermeshing of technological processes, socio-political attitudes, non-linear histories, vectors of desire, affective flows and diagrammatic spaces of potentiality inherent in the being of the art(?)work, and in the technologies with which it playfully experiments.

It is significant that in the case of Thiele's work the spectator is supposed to download the program and to run it, to perform, or at least to trigger the performance of the potentially disruptive gesture. There cannot be any pretension of innocence left for the spectator. At the same time the work is freely distributed in the public domain, again highlighting this folding of the private sphere into the public one and raising the problem of the type of community constituted by the accumulation of these private political gestures. And this dimension of the work is further underlined by its inclusion in the [runme.org](http://runme.org) repository that itself addresses in its archival practices the private/public paradox of downloadable art<sup>(?)</sup> and the question of online ownership.

Property, privacy, public space and the intricate relations between them emerge as a multilayered problematic in this case: TEMPEST as infringement upon and protection of privacy; *TEMPEST for Eliza* as a publicly available software that proposes a playful take on TEMPEST; the inclusion of the work in the [runme.org](http://runme.org) public repository as a 'found digital object';<sup>82</sup> the spectator downloading (, modifying) and running the software on their private computer in order to playfully exploit the vulnerabilities of the device; and the list can go on at length. What is of interest for us, is to note the extent to which the question of property is intimately interlinked with the renegotiation of public and private space (Who owns the digital information? How to protect it? Should it be public? Should it be private? What types of communities are subtended by this renegotiation of the private and the public, and what kind of property regimes will develop in such communities?)

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<sup>82</sup> On [runme.org](http://runme.org) there is a documentation of the work, and a download link that is still functional. Yet, once the work downloaded, one needs a certain degree of technical expertise to be able to actually run it. Because of continuous hardware and software updates, more often than not with such works the code needs to be modified in order to actually be functional.

#### Fragment 4

Among the smaller collections of downloadable *net art*(?), that are active at the time of this writing, *Off Site Project*'s monthly micro-ZIP-file-exhibitions, active from 2017 (ongoing), is an exciting case.<sup>83</sup> It includes works like Pita Arreola's *Atlas of Female Anatomy* (2017), that gathers some 2000 low-resolution .jpg files with representations of female body parts, selected from online images of classic and contemporary art(?)works;<sup>84</sup> or Andrew Marsh's *From the Margins* (2018), that presents four .rtf text files, each of them containing one single link towards a webpage on [issuu.com](http://issuu.com) (a digital publishing platform) where the user finds a scanned copy of a book—Maurice Blanchot's *The Space of Literature*, Gilles Deleuze's *The Logic of Sense*, John Fiske's *Introduction To Communication Studies*, or Michel Foucault's *The Archaeology of Knowledge*—with all the pages digitally blackened, only the marginalia left visible, an homage to the traces left on the pages by anonymous readers.<sup>85</sup> Both works operate a playful yet powerful critique of the paradigms that subtend our systems of knowledge.

#### Fragment 4.1

*Atlas of Female Anatomy* plays with the imperative of categorization immanent in a knowledge system based on representation, and suggests that misogyny and phallocentrism are inherent aspects of this system. The objectification and aestheticization of the female body, as one of the preferred targets of the classificatory gaze, is foregrounded and deconstructed in the structure of folders that constitute the *Altas*, and with it the logic of categorization itself comes to be under question. As a

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<sup>83</sup> *Off Site Project* is an online exhibition space founded and curated by Pita Arreola and Elliott Burns, the micro-ZIP-file-exhibitions can be accessed at <http://www.offsiteproject.org/ZIP> accessed 02.09.2018.

<sup>84</sup> For more information about this work see the 'info' section for the downloadable exhibition *Atlas of Female Anatomy* by Pita Arreola, on <http://www.offsiteproject.org/ZIP>, accessed 04.02.2021.

<sup>85</sup> For more information about this work see the 'info' section for the downloadable exhibition *From the Margins* by Andrew Marsh, on <http://www.offsiteproject.org/ZIP>, accessed 04.02.2021.

spectator, by choosing to download the work and browse through it, one occupies a self-contradictory position, somewhere between a failed act of voyeurism, and a deconstruction of this act and of its underpinnings in the larger system of knowledge based on representation that we operate in. By downloading the work the spectator also slides to a certain extent into the position of the owner and producer: there is nothing to stop from further adding material in the *Atlas*, changing its structure, or modifying it in any other way. And of course, nothing to stop from uploading the modified work online and further disseminating it.<sup>86</sup> Hence, once again, the spectator comes to be an integral part of the work of the art<sup>(?)</sup>work, both as a patient of this work, and as an actant that potentially further modifies it.

We already saw, through a reading of Deleuze's critique of the dogmatic image of thought, that the system of representation (that we encounter here under the form of a classificatory system of knowledge) is interlinked with the stable identity of 'a is a', 'I myself'. Hence, what is at stake in this work (and in the work that the spectator performs) is also the identity with itself of the subject and the self-identity of objects in the world. In this sense, *Atlas of Female Anatomy* suggests, by categorizing images of female body parts chosen from visual art<sup>(?)</sup>works, that the classificatory system of knowledge and the stable identity (something being itself) interlinked with it have an

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<sup>86</sup> In fact such appropriations and re-workings are a well established *net art*<sup>(?)</sup> practice. See for example Olia Lialina's project *Last Real Net Art Museum* (<http://myboyfriendcamebackfromth.ewar.ru>, accessed 15.06.2020) which features remakes by other artists of Lialina's seminal 1996 piece *My Boyfriend Came Back From the War*, or *The Copie Copains Club* (<https://copie-copains-club.net>, accessed 15.06.2020) initiated by Emilie Brout, Caroline Delieutraz & Maxime Marion: 'a club of friends who copy each other. Inspired, among others and in no particular order, of Surfing Clubs, Creative Commons, the Free Art License and Mickey Club, CCC aims to highlight the art of copying in the Post-Internet era' (from the manifesto of *The Copie Copains Club*, <https://copie-copains-club.net/club/>, accessed 15.06.2020).

inherent politics: the 'common sense' politics of an oppressive, phallogentric, normatively heterosexual socio-political context.<sup>87</sup>

#### *Fragment 4.2*

*From the Margins*, going in a different direction, foregrounds the passive/active process of *reading* and its absurd unreadable traces, its excretions, (non-)signs that lead nowhere. These are traces of *sense* that appear in all their unreadable absurdity when detached from their host texts. Yet the genitivity of sense, its un-teleologic fertility, leaves its most immediate of traces in these non-sensical scribbles. These are the closest (non-)signs that attest to the movement of thinking, to the violent and uncomfortable moment of encounter that provokes thinking in thought: an 'oh!', an 'ah!', and a hurried underline, circle, underline again, and once more, all in the hope to retain whatever it was that it happened, to make sure that one secures that fragile access to the movements of thinking (and, of course, that never happens). All else comes afterwards as elaboration, exploration, folding etc. of these specta(c)torial moments. The very links that one downloads as Andrew Marsh's *From the Margins*, are themselves, in a way, such ruptured signs, that might or might not send where they were supposed to, mirroring the works they are assumed to offer access towards. What the spectator comes in possession of through the download is a signifier severed from its signified, a promise that

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<sup>87</sup> Cf. for example Sara Ahmed's contention that the phenomenological constitution of objects in the world and embodied subjects depends on the orientations that they are inscribed in and that they recursively perform. Ahmed argues that there is a certain stability of the experience of the world for embodied subjectivities oriented along white, heterosexual, male, middle-class lines inasmuch as the world itself, as the result of a colonialist, racist, misogynist historical accumulation is oriented along these lines. By contrast, embodied experiences that are out of line are disorienting and problematize embodied subjectivity in relation to its world (Ahmed 2006). In my reading, different to some extent from Ahmed's own conclusions, this implies a fundamental questioning of one's identity and that of the objects that coagulate in the world ('a is (not quite) a', 'I (never quite) am myself').

waits to be fulfilled, something like a squared *différance* (the link as a grammatological structure that amplifies the deferring and differing inherent in the sign: *différa<sup>2</sup>nce*).

*Speculatively extending fragments 4.1 and 4.2*

One thing that the scribbles on the blackened pages of *From the Margins* and the fragmentary images of the *Atlas of Female Anatomy* have in common is that they are pointing towards fragments and byproducts of a capitalist economy of knowledge, that are ignored and rejected by the very economy that produces them (in a way, resonating thus with the unintended electromagnetic leaks that *TEMPEST for Eliza* engages with). These fragmentary, marginal (non-)signs have to be rejected because they subvert the fetishistic attachment of the consumer to the product (they contradict the unity and identity of the object of desire with itself, and again, tend to open it up as a complex ecology much harder to reify and commodify), also because they attest to an uncomputable, unprobabilistic event of specta(c)torship that is not of the order of production or consumption.<sup>88</sup> Thus another aspect of the download that we should notice: a potential subversion of a capitalist economy system based on representation, inasmuch as the object of desire (the authoritative book, the idealized image of the female body) is opened to fragmentation, non-hierarchical interventions, and non-linear distribution (sharing)—a complex ecology rather than a commodity.

This economic problematic, that surfaces (among others) and gain contours in the process of specta(c)torship afforded by *Atlas of Female Anatomy* and *From the Margins*, has deeper roots in

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<sup>88</sup> One has to ask how an economic system in which the specta(c)torial gesture (the *reading* gesture) is valued in itself would look like? What would happen if the spectator and the reader would gain credit instead of losing credit (paying) for their specta(c)torial gestures? But one also has to ask if the quantified valuation of the specta(c)torial gesture would not be in itself a step towards the reification and commodification of specta(c)torship, a slide from specta(c)torship to specta©torship, blurring even further the boundaries between the spectator and the consumer.

the very gesture of downloading. A certain tension arises in the necessary process of alienation and appropriation that the download implies, a tension that precedes even the first interaction with the works, and that extends itself throughout the experience that they subsequently offer. There is something out of place there with the download, something that eludes the well-established laws of economic exchange, as well as those of the political and social systems built around them. For the most part, it is not a full-fledged confrontation but rather a certain troubling incongruity.

One aspect of this dissonance (absurdity) of downloadable net art<sup>(?)</sup> is the free availability of the works, that stop being simply commodities in a system of economic exchange, and become rather shared distributed objects whose existence depends on being freely disseminated (and often modified) and that thus do not respect the strict trajectories and limits of ownership imposed by the art market. Echoing Kenneth Goldsmith's advocacy for extended online sharing practices (Goldsmith 2011), or Pierre Lévy's critical discourse on online property (Lévy n.d.), one can say that the downloadable work inscribes itself in an economy of sharing, based on giving and gifts, as opposed to the economies of scarcity that govern traditional markets.

Lévy observes that our economic systems are underlined by a belief in the scarcity of goods, itself based on the destructive character of consumption (whatever it is that one consumes is no longer available for the other; the goods diminish proportionally with consumption) and the exclusive or private nature of acquisition. Lévy contends that this economic paradigm contravenes the evidence of contemporary everyday life, namely the fact that digital information is not diminished by its transmission, or destroyed by being utilized. Which is not to say that the physicality of the structures that make digital information possible can be disregarded, but that the materiality of digital information is such that the digital book, the digital art<sup>(?)</sup>work, the online audio piece or film

can be downloaded without affecting their availability for future users.<sup>89</sup> Quite on the contrary, if anything, the digital object is enriched by being shared, and, at the limit, it exists only by being shared. (*We See In Every Direction* is literally such a case where the work exists only when shared by multiple users.) For Lévy, that means that an economy of abundance can be conceived, with concepts and practices radically different from those of the already inadequate classic economy of scarcity.

While agreeing with Lévy, Goldsmith and many others who critique the imposition of obsolete economic (and also social and political) frames on a medium that so obviously functions on a different logic, nonetheless I am reluctant to see the economy of sharing as one of plentitude or abundance. The economy of sharing does not emerge on a neutral background and neither as a

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<sup>89</sup> One of the most relevant and stringent problems that arises from the materiality of the digital is that of the significant ecological toll of the technological network—always strictly inter-related with the socio-political problematic of privilege, exclusion and oppression (Cubitt 2017). As Sean Cubitt's *Finite Media* (2017) abundantly shows, this is a problem of scale. In terms borrowed from Derrida via Stiegler, the network and its possibilities can be understood as a *pharmakon*, both remedy and poison at the same time (and the dosage is key). Thus, a few points with respect to our problem (the practice of sharing against an economy of scarcity): 1) disturbing and questioning the mainstream economy of scarcity can very well mean disturbing and questioning the ecological impact of *information capitalism* (which does not mean that the works that perform this disturbance, or the process of specta(c)torship they open up, are in any way innocent or outside of the problem, or that they necessarily offer a viable solution); 2) sharing, making available, is fundamentally different from mass distribution (and it is with mass distribution that the ecological toll is greatly intensified; which does not mean again that sharing is an innocent practice); 3) it is in a society based on shared, open archives, on access to knowledge, that solutions to the ecological crisis are likely to emerge, and not when information is safeguarded behind prohibitive prices; 4) while limits on the amount of data used might be worth considering in line with targets in reducing environmental impact, limits on content cannot be judged from this point of view: there is no reason for specific types of content to be less accessible than others and protected by high pay walls.



universal solution, but only as a deconstruction of certain aspects of the economy of scarcity from within. Hence the importance of thinking through the problematic relations between the two. But more than that, with respect to digital information, the economy of sharing is essentially limited by scarcity. It is just that the scarcity lies elsewhere. What we are confronted with is a shortage of embodied thinking, both at individual and collective levels: a shortage of *information*—in the sense that information will be given below by following Simondon's distinction between the signals of digital devices and information as a tension between two disparate orders of reality, a tension that affords a process of individuation and that constitutes the potentiality of the unpredictable *sense* that drives individuation (Simondon [1958] 2013, 31).<sup>90</sup> From this perspective, digital information is information only inasmuch as it emerges from, and participates in, a process of individuation, of psychic individuation in this case—that is, inasmuch as it is driven by, and it drives, embodied thinking. Paradoxically, the economy of sharing is grounded in, and limited by, a fundamental scarcity of information, yet this scarcity has a dynamic that is significantly different from that of the traditional economy of scarcity.

This position resonates to a certain extent with the problematic of the 'attention economy'. Jonathan Beller proposes for example that contemporary capitalism is driven by the *cinematic mode of production* in which value is extracted from 'human' attention and new relations of production are founded upon the expropriation of attention. For Beller, cinema and its succeeding formations, computers and the internet among them, are deterritorialised factories in which spectators perform value-productive labour—hence, cinema, computer and the internet (among other formations) instantiate and support the new modes of production predicated on the expropriation of attention

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<sup>90</sup> In this sense, information is never a given consistent with itself, never data (digital or not). See the discussion of information in *Chapter IV*.

(Beller 2003).<sup>91</sup> From this perspective, one could argue that certain instances of net art<sup>(?)</sup> specta(c)torship challenge the 'attention economy' by opening up a space where attention is de-commodified—at least in cases where net art<sup>(?)</sup> challenges the logic of the art market and art institutions, and problematizes the expectations of visual entertainment or the relations between visuality and language (that according to Beller are an integral part of the *cinematic mode of production*). Nonetheless, while this is a valid argument, it is also potentially misleading. The risk is constituted by the temptation to answer the 'attention economy' in its own terms, based on a positivist understanding of attention as a quantifiable resource grounded in the unquestioned figure of the individual. Beller avoids this trap by suggesting that critically addressing 'the productive value of human attention' must take into account the fact that 'the ostensible immediacy of the world always already passes through the production-system' (Beller 2003, 105)—that is, the constitution of the world passes through the specific dynamics of the image inherent in the *cinematic mode of production*. Hence, critically addressing attention becomes a problem of engaging with the structure of the *cinematic mode of production* in its entirety, with its psychological, social, political, economic and cultural dynamics.

The point that I want to underline here is that the scarcity of attention is not of the same order as the scarcity of commodities, and the very reduction of attention to a commodity misrepresents it and impedes its functioning (with wide-spreading socio-political consequences). The problem is not that of reclaiming *something* that was alienated from us into a capitalist commodity (attention), but

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<sup>91</sup> Importantly for us here, in order to formulate a theory of attention that could provide a critical standpoint for countering the 'attention economy', Beller proposes to shift from a passive understanding of 'spectatorship', to an active one that sees 'spectatorship' as 'active production' (Beller 2003, 94). From the perspective that I propose here, this drive towards devalorizing the 'passive' in favor of 'active production', 'labour' etc. feeds into the socio-political and economic program that it is attempting to criticize. For a discussion of this problematic see *Chapter VI*.

rather than of understanding and practicing attention beyond its reduction to *something* that one can possess in the first place.

Néstor Braunstein's article *Economics (and) the Politics of Attention* (Braunstein 2014) offers a cogent critique of the paradigm that simply postulates attention as commodity. Braunstein claims that a positivist understanding of attention does not account for the unconscious dimension of subjectivity and the socio-political dynamics inherent in the unconscious. Braunstein's proposal to understand attention as *attending* to the relational structures that shape us into who we are (intersubjective and transsubjective dimensions that run all the way from being alive in an environment to linguistic and social structures) highlights the incompatibility between the 'attention economy' and an understanding of embodied thinking that goes beyond positivist calculus. Nonetheless, Braunstein's framework remains grounded in the unquestioned figure of the embodied 'human' subject and in drawing an opposition between technology and the 'human'. We will come to better understand the problematic of the scarcity of information, in terms different from those of critical discourses engaging with 'attention economy', only later in this text, once we will be able to formulate the problematic of archives and information.<sup>92</sup>

For now, let us note the odd socio-economic and political dynamic that *We See In Every Direction* and similar practices set up and participate in: a not-exactly-capitalist (yet not directly anti-capitalist either) economy of sharing at the very core of the internet, at the very core of the 'communication superhighway' that sustains the whole contemporary capitalist system and constitutes one of the privileged loci of the global market. That already brings into consideration a possible way of thinking about downloadable net art<sup>(?)</sup> in the terms of Nicolas Bourriaud's critique of the reification

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<sup>92</sup> See *Chapter IV*, especially subchapter *IV.3 (Still) Genesis: Archives and Information*.

and commodification of interpersonal relations in capitalist societies, following his indication that *relational art* (in this case downloadable net art<sup>(?)</sup>) might offer an alternative.

### *Fragment 5*

There is another aspect to the download that should not go unnoticed. From the perspective of the spectator, downloading the work also means that a protective security layer, that is in place when a net art<sup>(?)</sup> work runs in a commercial browser, is removed. As a spectator, one has to take a risk: downloading and running a software from an 'unknown developer' (or opening a potentially harmful file archive). The simple fact of doing so means, to some extent, accepting to be vulnerable and opening oneself to the actions of the other. A field of tension and trust is established with the download, and the gesture of specta(c)torship will subsequently happen against this risky background that is much too obvious to be ignored, but then again, for the most part, much too discrete to be regarded as a component part of the work. It looms in the background, but rarely comes forward in plain sight. It rather establishes a context that passes through the whole process of specta(c)torship. In more visual terms, it throws a slightly unfamiliar light upon the experience of engaging the work, provoking unexpected shadows and volumes, surprising nuances and textures.

### *Brief summary of a puzzle with (too) many missing pieces*

In short: the gesture of downloading operates a problematic folding of the private and public space, affording thus the opening of a complex socio-political problematic and the decentering of the systems of property and propriety that underlie capitalist society. The download places the subsequent process of spectat(c)torship against a background permeated by a tension resulting from this unstable negotiation of property (, propriety), the private, and the public. It is not only that many downloadable net art<sup>(?)</sup> works (and the exhibitions and archives in which they feature) directly or indirectly engage in socio-political critique and dissident experimentation, but also that the

gesture of downloading and its implications inherently teems with such potential disturbances. I am not arguing that the possibility of critically engaging with our socio-political systems based on representation opens *only* in downloadable net art(?)—that would be plainly false—, but rather that such a possibility inheres to a certain extent in the downloadable character of these works. Also, the claim that the gesture of downloading inherently contains affordances that can prove disturbing for the socio-political and economic models that govern our society does not mean declaring that the gesture of downloading is inherently liberatory and neither that it is sufficient by itself to provoke significant socio-political and economic change, but merely that it offers a seed for thinking such (potentially dangerous, yet necessary) change, it has the potential to offer impulses towards opening up such thinking.

## **II.2. See**

Let's wait just a moment longer before running *We See In Every Direction*, and opening the Pandora's Box of (dis)possession and (in)security in the digital world. A moment longer, to let the tension build up, and also in order to observe the icon that we will soon be going to click on. Three superimposed concentric discs of decreasing dimensions. White, blue and black from the biggest to the smallest one. A schematic rendering of an eye, with a promising/menacing 'WeSee' inscribed underneath. Two small, white, semi-transparent dots, can be read as light reflecting on the surface of the eye in a rendering common to diverse animation styles. And this reflection stands for the light that makes the eye itself visible, in other words, in this case, for the world outside the screen, for that 'reality' in which a spectator is facing a screen, looking into the eye that the work suggests itself to be. The icon seems to represent the potentiality of being seen inscribed on the representation of the possibility of seeing; the representation of the possibility of the other's gaze is superimposed on the representation of the eye that harbours the possibility of representing the other and its eyes.

Even before taking place, before being present, *We See In Every Direction* somehow presents itself,

through the icon, as a take on the power of the gaze and its relation to representation, an essay on seeing and being seen.

The title gives a further impulse in this direction by underlying the gesture of seeing, and suggesting that it is taking place in terms that seem at odds with the 'human' limits. A collective gaze that covers every direction, a utopian gaze without any blind spots—that in a strange way might remind us of Dziga Vertov's *kino-eye* and its purported potential for political subversion by restructuring vision and visibility (Vertov 1984, 40-2). In a sense, a way of opening up the private 'walled' spaces of the internet to communal experience, as the text that accompanies the work suggests<sup>93</sup>—a means of challenging the increasing seclusion and secrecy of experience in a medium inherently open, a medium that exists as a form of sharing. But, in another sense, it can be just as easily understood as a critique of the impossibility of online privacy, a playful way of thematizing and making visible the impersonal gaze that in the name of market interests and national security (among others) surveys every movement that happens on the internet. One is never alone online, the aggressive impersonal eye, seeing in every direction, is always there to judge, to correct, to normalize, to condemn if the 'common interest' (which is also 'common sense') requires it. I am not interested in subscribing to either of the two readings at the expense of the other, but in noting the tensions that the possibility of their coexistence opens up.

Hence, the icon and the title open up the question of visibility. Online specta(c)torship, to be sure, is not only a problem of visibility, quite on the contrary, it engenders a complex affective experience, a generative intertwining of intensive fields. Nonetheless, as I argued in the *Introduction*, in order to account for the process of individuation that structures these intensive fields, one has to pass through a critique of the system of representation very much dependent on visibility, dependent on

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<sup>93</sup> See the presentation text on <http://ineverydirection.net>, accessed 15.06.2020.


the promise of the light of truth, dependent on the promise of the *clear* and *distinct*—that is to say, dependent on the collapse of an intensive visual field into a world of individuals equal with themselves. Such a critique follows the consequences of a thought based on representation in order to understand what would be at stake in thinking beyond (or before) this now ubiquitous paradigm, but also asks how the system of representation itself comes to be deformed, striated, populated with the fissures of its paradoxes by these gestures that fold it against itself. Specta(c)torship constitutes a (de)construction (always from within) of the system of representation (which is grounded on recognition), playing the visual against itself. *We See in Every Direction* (through the icon and the title) promises to offer an entry point into this problematic of visibility folded against itself.

## II.3. Run

So, finally, double click on the icon... Wait...

And... the work does not work...

## II.4. Fail

When running the work, a browser window opens, but it displays only the logo, at a bigger scale (the schematic eye looking at you looking at it), and the never fulfilled promise: 'Connecting...'.  


The upper bar of the window reads: 'We See (In Every Direction), Jonas Lund, 2013'. We will take this failure, as our (new) point of departure.<sup>94</sup>

Most probably the updates of the operating systems and the ongoing changes in the technology that underlies the internet, meant to increase security, are already incompatible with a work that aims to share the space of the browser. Regardless of the specific technical motives though, the short lifespan of online works is one of their main characteristics, and in spite of conservation efforts such as those lead by Rhizome.org, for the spectator engaging with net art(?), its volatility is a crucial component, inherent in the practice itself and not an external accident.<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> On aesthetics of failure in net art(?) see (White 2006, 85-113). White argues that the aesthetics of failure despite their liberatory promise perform a certain exclusion of the spectator who is not savvy of technology and of its workings. My position is that the 'liberatory' aspect of the failure resides exactly in opening a crisis that, in order to be navigated, supposes taking the time to engage (one way or another) with the consequences of the technology that one does not understand. I do not get what is technically at stake in the failure that I am discussing here (and that is a shame, a shame which is intrinsic to the process of specta(c)torship), which is exactly what opens up the intensive space of specta(c)torship as a crisis (in the ultimate instance as a crisis of identity, a crisis of the I that fails to understand the technology through which it becomes), rather than maintaining the stable status-quo. Also, White criticizes the aestheticization of failure as a disempowering move: instead of being disruptive, failure becomes merely a question of aesthetic appearance. For reasons that have to do with the complex relationship between aesthetics and politics (which remain to be elucidated in the subsequent chapters with respect to the theory of individuation), I cannot concur with the simplification that opposes aesthetics to politics. The question is rather: does the particular aesthetic experience in question (provoked by failure or not) open towards a process of individuation?

<sup>95</sup> Which does not mean in any way that I argue against conservation. Quite on the contrary, I consider the effort to preserve net art(?) a matter of the utmost importance (see *Chapter IV* for a discussion of networks of care as an emergent archival practice in net art(?)). I am merely observing that as spectators, at this moment, and at least for the foreseeable future, we engage with works that exist in the moment of the encounter. There is nothing to guarantee that tomorrow they will still be accessible, or that they will work in the same way. Archiving is a solution for some of them, and not for others.



Sometimes this 'being in the moment', the ephemerality of the encounter with the spectator, is deliberately accentuated, thematized and explored in the works themselves. It happens for example in Donald Hanson's *Permanent Redirect*<sup>96</sup> (2018), a web page that, every time it is reached (by a 'human' user or a robot), moves to a new URL leaving behind a link towards the new address. Every new spectator has to click through all the previous URL addresses in order to reach the current location of the work, which will change immediately after their visit. As more spectators view the work it becomes less and less accessible. According to the author, it is part of experiments in digital scarcity and internet impermanence.<sup>97</sup> Similarly, *Seances* (2016), a film project by Guy Maddin, Evan Johnson, Galen Johnson and the National Film Board of Canada,<sup>98</sup> frames the experience of film through the lens of loss; using the affordances of internet technology *Seances* algorithmically creates unique film experiences assembled from imagined reinterpretations of lost silent-era movies. The work explores the fact that 80% of the films from the silent era are lost, by inviting the audience to see unique films dynamically assembled from prerecorded footage (inspired by lost silent-era films) in never-to-be-repeated configurations, each of them existing only in the moment, with no pausing, scrubbing or sharing permitted.<sup>99</sup>

I am not sure if a work is ever born, digital or not, but it certainly dies, and sometimes it does so right under our eyes as its very way of being. In the case of *We See in Every Direction* the epitaph reads: 'Connecting...'.

So, here we are, faced with the impossibility of an encounter, confronting an unattainable connection, a lost system of relations. And then, there is the memory of previous experiences (both

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<sup>96</sup> Visit the work at <https://permanent-redirect.xyz>, accessed 07.11.2018.

<sup>97</sup> See the text under the '?' sign on <https://permanent-redirect.xyz>.

<sup>98</sup> Visit the work at <http://seances.nfb.ca>, accessed 07.11.2018.

<sup>99</sup> See 'About' section on <http://seances.nfb.ca>.

in the form of the online documentation of the work, and as personal<sup>(?)</sup> embodied memories of my<sup>(?)</sup> past encounters with it—hypomnesis/anamnesis) when *We See In Every Direction* did offer the connection it promised. Or, did it, ever?

It just so happens that the window frozen in the outspoken attempt to connect, is an image that epitomizes the purported broken promise of internet technology. Not only did the internet fail to bring us closer to each other, claim its critics, but more than that it hindered 'human' relations by standardizing and oversimplifying them. Nicolas Bourriaud in his *Relational Aesthetics* contends that we live in a society characterized by the reification and commercialization of (what he calls) 'human interaction', where the 'communication superhighways' (and the internet, although not directly named in his essay, is definitely one of them) threaten to become the only possible links between people. Consequently the 'inter-human' relations are nothing but standardized artefacts governed by the rules of capitalist markets (Bourriaud 2002, 2-3). In this context, for Bourriaud, it is the work of art<sup>(?)</sup> that can overcome the limits of our standardized, reified, commodified interactions, and has the capacity to open up a social interstice—an interval in the 'human' relations that suggests other possibilities than the ones structuring everyday life, an area that proposes encounters outside the institutionally reinforced 'communication zones' and their rigid rules (Bourriaud 2002, 6). A confrontation is thus set up between the reification and commodification of 'human interaction' under an oppressive capitalist market and what Bourriaud calls 'relational art', namely those art<sup>(?)</sup> forms that explore the gaps in the capitalist system of relations and rediscover or enrich 'human' interaction. Stretching the limits of what Bourriaud considers to be 'relational art', let us explore the possibility of understanding *We See In Every Direction* from the perspective of relational aesthetics.

There is a certain tension that is involved in talking about net art<sup>(?)</sup> as relational aesthetics.

Bourriaud completely ignores works that could be associated with net art<sup>(?)</sup>, presumably because of their reliance on a technological context that comes under critique in his project, while several authors writing about net art<sup>(?)</sup> dismiss Bourriaud's theory as an appropriation by the institutional art-world of ideas and practices developed by early media artists that placed themselves outside of the institutional context.<sup>100</sup> While the problematic of the institutionalization of net art<sup>(?)</sup> raises stringent questions that need urgent addressing,<sup>101</sup> nonetheless, from a perspective interested in the dynamic space of intensive relations that the process of specta(c)torship opens up, Bourriaud's argument proves to be highly relevant.<sup>102</sup> This relevance is also underlined by Rachel Greene's observation of the affinities between relational aesthetics and early net art<sup>(?)</sup> projects (Greene 2004, 27) or Ramzi Turki's engagement with insights from Bourriaud's relational aesthetics in order to theorize a net art<sup>(?)</sup> practice predicated on the gesture of *sharing* on Facebook (Turki 2019).

### **II.3. Run (again)**

This time we will start by going back. Back to *We See In Every Direction*, back to the time when it worked (if it ever did). Double click on the icon, again (if 'again' can refer to an action that is on the point of happening in the past of the one that it repeats).

On the already politically and economically charged background created through the download gesture a browser window pops up, very similar to that of any commercial browser, except that it is displaying simultaneously the pointers of all the current users. Any action performed in the space of the browser, that is to say every movement of the pointers, every text typed in, every click, every

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<sup>100</sup> See for example (Daniels 2009, 31-32), especially note 27.

<sup>101</sup> See for example (Jones 2018, 82-88).

<sup>102</sup> See below.

change of URL happens at the same time for everyone present. Surfing the internet is transformed from a private, individual experience into a collective one. The users, present (or represented?) on-screen as pointers, encounter each other and interact limited by the standard set of actions defined for the digital space of an internet browser. The unusual character of the encounter, with all its restrictions, opens up a, maybe not new but surely less familiar, space of relations.

Bourriaud thinks of these spaces of relations, of these systems of interactions, as *forms*. A *form* in this definition is a lasting encounter (an encounter that endures beyond the momentary, by virtue of its coherence, by virtue of the 'inner dependencies' that are instantiated in the encounter) between heterogeneous elements that come together and create a coherent unit, a structure (Bourriaud 2002, 7). Forms happen inside a specific system of relations, and in their turn modify and recreate this system by bringing forth new encounters, new connections.

Thus, there are two ways in which an art<sup>(?)</sup>work has a form for Bourriaud: it has a material form and it instantiates a form inasmuch as it provokes a system of relations: '[T]he contemporary artwork's form is spreading out from its material form: it is a linking element, a principle of dynamic agglutination' (Bourriaud 2002, 8). Or, put differently, the art<sup>(?)</sup>work has a material form (inasmuch as it is a system of relations between different materials) that, in its turn, forms: creates new systems of relations social, political, economic (themselves forms). And the difference between the two becomes rather hazy. Bourriaud does not go further, but it is easy to see that these new (social, political, economic) forms will further create forms, systems of relations, including the material forms of art<sup>(?)</sup>works which will set the whole process in motion once again. What is of special interest for our discussion is that, for Bourriaud, it is amongst these chains of *formation* that one's own<sup>(?)</sup> image, one's individuality, appears. It is through a reference to the (amazing!) unsettling avant-garde novels of Witold Gombrowicz that Bourriaud makes this point:

[...] we see how each individual generates his own *form* through his behaviour, his way of coming across, and the way he addresses others. This form comes about in the borderline area where the individual struggles with the Other, so as to subject him to what he deems to be his “being”. So, for Gombrowicz, our “form” is merely a relational property, linking us with those who reify us by the way they see us, to borrow a Sartrean terminology. When the individual thinks he is casting an objective eye upon himself, he is, in the final analysis, contemplating nothing other than the result of perpetual transactions with the subjectivity of others. (Bourriaud 2002, 8-9)

One’s individuality, including one’s(?) body<sup>103</sup> (the construction of subjectivity is always an embodied performance), like the form of the art(?)work, like any other form, is emerging as a relational property, as the result of perpetual transactions with the others. This idea is far from being new in terms of theories of embodiment and subjectivation. It is to a certain degree similar, for example, to theories of performativity like the one that Judith Butler develops in *Gender Trouble* by understanding the body as a construction and asking: '[T]o what extent does the body *come into being* in and through the mark(s) of gender?' (Butler 1990, 8) or to Foucault’s emphasis in *The Order of Things* on the historicity of the 'human' figure, and its dependence on a particular *episteme* (Foucault [1966] 2005, 404).<sup>104</sup> It also resonates with Simondon’s understanding of individuality in

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<sup>103</sup> In my reading it is embodied subjectivity that is at stake in these passages of Bourriaud’s text, although it remains questionable if this was or not the intention of the author.

<sup>104</sup> Worth asking, in line with Bourriaud’s framework, if we should understand the *episteme* as *form*. Would the modern *episteme* in this sense be a lasting encounter of modern processes among which the rise of the nation state and that of capitalism? Then, against Bourriaud: would that not mean that the 'human' form is dependent on nation states and capitalism rather than emerging in the interstices of the system? Whose is then the voice emerging in the interstice?

terms of an ongoing process of individuation, and this is the framework that will be addressed below, in order to unpack the intricacies of this formation (and in-formation) of the 'human'.

But, for now, what about the Internet? Does it connect? Did it bring us closer together? Did it push us further apart? We don't know, we never will. But, what did become apparent is that it is ourselves, our individualities, our(?) bodies that are there to be won or lost in the (impossible?) online encounter. Playing around in the interstices of institutionally reinforced spaces of interaction means recreating our own(?) form, the system of relations that we ourselves(?) are.

'Connecting...'

#### **II.4. Point**

We return to *We See In Every Direction* asking what kind of bodies are contoured and made visible in the system of relations that it proposes. Is it a bit uncomfortable to meet the other as a naked pointer? What kind of encounter is this, anyway, when all the actants look alike, when no visual identification is possible? Masquerade? Deception? Dissimulation? Can items produced in series ever be naked? Can copies perfectly resembling each other ever be naked? Masked ball with users (un)dressed as arrowheads. Perfect copies of each other. Xeroxed. A naked xerox-copy? What is there left to hide and to reveal? A naked 'human' body? Can bodies moulded to fit an aesthetic ideal, the 'human' form, ever be naked? What is there left to cover and uncover? Naked arrows pointing upwards and left. Is there anything to reveal?

Well, the arrows were meant to point straight upwards initially, but technical constraints determined the engineers at Xerox in the '80s to prefer the arrow tilted towards the left.<sup>105</sup> And could we resist the temptation of a story with crimes, corruption and mistaken identity when we are pointed *North by Northwest*, as it were?

For one thing, the adoption of the tilted arrowhead mouse pointer by Apple and Microsoft for their Graphic User Interfaces does resemble a film noir scenario, if not de facto, at least as a folk story on the world wide web.<sup>106</sup> Xerox's own ongoing battle with the dictionary might point towards another one. The verb 'to xerox' purportedly damages the market rights of the company, so a campaign is going on against its usage.<sup>107</sup> One would better behave and speak (write) in the terms that suit the marketing plans of big corporations. Property is a labyrinthine subject, to put it mildly. Especially if it comes down to the question of who owns my(?) words. It is quite obvious that my words are not mine, but I'm also reluctant to concede that they belong to Xerox Corporation, that it is for Xerox to decide what the lexical field of 'to copy' should be, what it is to be included and excluded from it. But then again, there is some kind of poetics to rubbing out the words. And definitely plenty of politics. Even more so when trying to rub them out directly from the dictionary. Big economic players, nation states and activist organizations are all deeply involved in the business of

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<sup>105</sup> For a quick overview of the history of the tilted arrow-shaped mouse pointer see Ashley Feinberg's short article 'Why Your Mouse Cursor Is Slanted Instead of Straight' in *Gizmodo*: <https://gizmodo.com/why-your-mouse-cursor-is-slanted-instead-of-straight-1524402432>, accessed 09.02.2021.

<sup>106</sup> See as one of many examples John Brownlee's article 'How Steve Jobs Invented The Computer Mouse By Stealing it From Xerox': <https://www.cultofmac.com/95614/how-steve-jobs-invented-the-computer-mouse-by-stealing-it-from-xerox/>, accessed 02.09.2018.

<sup>107</sup> See (Stim 2007, 392).

deprecating inappropriate words, making thus palpable the relation between naming and power, the intertwining of language and bodies.<sup>108</sup>

Miao Ying's 2007 work *Blind Spot*, featured in Rhizome's *Net Art Anthology*, is an insightful and witty take on this problem. It involved searching on [google.cn](http://google.cn) all the words in a 1869-page Mandarin dictionary, and erasing with white tape those words for which the search returned at the bottom of the page a note reading: 'According to local laws, some search results are not showing', which indicates that the search for the respective term is censored. The 'final' *net art*(?) work is the unique physical copy of the manually annotated dictionary.<sup>109</sup>

What are our own blind spots? What is it that we cannot name? What is missing from our own dictionaries? What is it that the humanism in our gaze censors, obscures and prevents from mattering (in the interstices of the capitalist system, to go back to Bourriaud)? And when we observe the 'human' inscription over a white erasing tape that hides 'man', should we ask if it ever managed to break free of the former definition? Is the 'human' more than a mask for an eighteenth century nationalist white man? Or does the man, the proud citizen of his country (with all his

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<sup>108</sup> To clarify, I do politically side with some of these attempts of reforming vocabularies (instances associated with the push for the usage of inclusive language, campaigns against discriminatory language, etc.) and not with others (interdiction of usage of certain words on copyright grounds, censorship of language in the name of national politics, etc.). The problem is that the line between what is desirable and what is not in terms of 'rubbing out the words' is often quite blurred, and the only way of addressing this is through theoretically informed critical engagement, community debates, and flexibility that takes into account each particular case. Otherwise we risk ending up with correct, sterile, public spaces that exclude exactly those who were supposed to be protected (see case of LGBTQ+ communities arguably discriminated against in many mainstream online platforms exactly because their content is deemed 'sexually explicit', 'potentially adult' etc.)

<sup>109</sup> See the entry for *Blind Spot* by Miao Ying, in Rhizome.org's *Net Art Anthology*, <https://anthology.rhizome.org/blind-spot>, accessed 24.08.2018.



crimes), come forth through the attempted erasure in spite of the best intentions of those trying to obscure it?

Back to the point. What do the pointers point towards, anyway? What do we expect to find if we follow the direction indicated by the arrow? What is hiding there North by Northwest, waiting to be revealed? Bodies, it seems: what we assume to be the bodies of the users (or is this a misidentification?), the bodies whose re-presentations (the pointers) are present on-screen, touching each other without touching.

Is that an encounter after all? We do not know if these bodies encounter each other, but we do know that they fight—for the control of the browser, the presentation text states—and that they are observing each other's (on-screen) actions.<sup>110</sup> Beyond the playful character of the work, a certain aggression becomes apparent: the intrusion of the other into a space that we learned to consider private. What is the other doing in 'my' browser?

It is possible to read *We See In Every Direction* as an essay on the violence of the click, on the violence done by and to the bodies that are instantiated by the banal gesture of moving the mouse arrow and clicking. But it is also possible to read the work as a take on the violence of the gaze: an intrusion of the other's gaze in the privacy of the web browser. And, of course, the browser window was never a private space at all (incognito modes or not). *We See in Every Direction*, by defamiliarizing the space of the browser in a relevant way, brings into focus a problematic that was always already there. We already saw how the icon and the title are pushing us on this course even before running the work itself.

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<sup>110</sup> See the presentation text and the short video documentation of the work at <http://ineverydirection.net>.

## II.5. See (in every direction)

This brings us to the tense relations between the gaze and the bodies that bear it. *We See In Every Direction*. Indeed. The Internet as a new(?) form of *panopticon*, as an instance of the mechanism that separates the viewer from the viewed (Foucault [1975] 1995, 201-2) by postulating an anonymous viewer, positioned at the center, that has no image, has no shape, and in the end has no body, and a multitude of blind bodies, viewed from every direction but that are deprived of seeing, or at least of seeing that which is gazing upon them. In Foucault's account, the individual is formed as subject of the system of power, it is a product of surveillance, and in its turn it is part of the mechanism of surveillance (Foucault [1975] 1995, 217). The gaze at the center, without being abstract, lacks individuality, also lacks a *form*; it is power rendered invisible, untouchable, or rather emerging and existing only as an unformed and all encompassing gaze. *A faceless gaze* says Foucault (Foucault [1975] 1995, 214). At the same time, each one of us embodies this gaze, and not only turns it towards the others but also towards oneself (Foucault [1975] 1995, 202-3). The very process of becoming an individual in a society means internalizing the panoptic mechanism that ensures the perpetual reproduction of the limits that define this individuality, that ensure the ongoing reproduction of the contours that shape the 'human' body, one's own(?) body.

The panoptic surveillance does not serve a system of power that imposes itself from above, but emerges from the micro-power relations that define individuals. We instantiate the panopticon in our relations to each other, while at the same time, we as 'human' bodies, as individuals in a society, are shaped by the panopticon. The power of the figure of the 'human' as 'natural' given, relies on this vicious circle of surveillance in which each of us, inasmuch as it is becoming an individual, is both surveillant and surveilled. The gaze at the center of the panopticon is nobody's gaze, it is invisible, shapeless, and at the same time it is embodied in all the blind bodies under surveillance. The

surveilled body contains the principles of its own submission, it incorporates the violence that forms and reforms it.

Is there anything specific about the panoptic system instantiated by the internet? Is there anything specific to the blind bodies that it produces? Without doubt, the regulated internet (in the 'West' as in Russia, China, etc.) is committed to contouring the same obsolete 'human' identity supposed by the 'JE ME pense',<sup>111</sup> the same embodied subject identical with itself, contoured by its skin, that can function as a citizen of the territorial national state and as a consumer in capitalist markets. What is produced every time under the impersonal gaze instantiated by the internet is the same modern 'human' individual (read white man, proud citizen of its country) as postulated by the socio-economic-political system. Or, more exactly, regardless of what kind of body tends to emerge, it is forced into the 'human' contours stipulated by the system in its inertia.

But, once the interplay of seeing and being seen happens in the interstices of the system of power, in between the spaces defined by the rules of capitalist markets and national politics, it is not obvious that the bodies that emerge in this interplay fit the limits of the 'human', it is not obvious at all that the text on the screen, the movements of the pointer, can be traced immediately to something like the agency of a 'human' body. Yet, inasmuch as they are the traces of a system of

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<sup>111</sup> In *Difference and Repetition* Deleuze argues that the cartesian 'I' (JE) is necessarily subtended by an embodied self (ME) as its material ground and that the correlation of the identity of the 'JE' and the chain of resemblances that constitutes the 'MOI/ME' cancels (following the exigencies of 'good sense' and 'common sense') the intensive fields of individuation into the figure of a self-identical embodied subject—a move which preempts the understanding of the ontogenetic dynamic of difference and repetition (Deleuze [1968] 1993, 330-33). Thus the 'JE ME pense' can be understood as the unacknowledged principle of the cartesian cogito.

agencies, they define, at least retrospectively, a body, the body that produced them (and is produced by them). What is this body? Whose body is it? What are its limits?

In a somewhat disconcerting gesture the arrow always seems to point in two divergent directions at the same time, to create two different pasts in its wake, by pointing towards two different futures.

On the one hand, there are the bodies of the users in front of their computers, the supposed 'human' bodies fighting and observing each other while sitting in front of their screens. On the other hand, a fragile and ill-definable body *individuated* from a complex relational field, that flickers for a moment, yet never fully actualizes itself. A glitch in the 'humanness' of our past future bodies.

Where is the arrow heading? Which past will it actualize in its future, and which future in its past?

Can it ever escape the paradox and reach its target? And if it does so, what is it that it will encounter, that it will hit, wound, kill, when its movement will be arrested?

## II.6. Click

Let us go back (yet again) to *We See In Every Direction* and observe that it resonates with a larger corpus of works that appropriate the internet browser as their medium, and problematize the browsing experience by altering some of its essential characteristics.

For example, Constant Dullaart's *the revolving internet*<sup>112</sup> (2010) has the pages displayed in the browser window constantly rotating clockwise. The user starts from a Google search engine page, and can perform any of the actions that would normally be available in the browser, the peculiarity being that everything rotates continuously. Alain Barthélémy's 2013 response *The Revolving*

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<sup>112</sup> Visit the work at <http://therevolvinginternet.com/> accessed 02.09.2018.

*Internet Counterclockwise*<sup>113</sup>, posted on <https://copie-copains-club.net> presents the spectator with the same experience, but, as the title suggests, the web pages rotate counterclockwise (currently the work displays only a 'page not found' error message that endlessly rotates). Another work that modifies the behaviour of the browser is Rafaël Rozendaal's *Abstract Browsing* (2014),<sup>114</sup> an extension for Google Chrome, that, once installed and activated, displays the fields that compose the webpage in different colours and with no text. The browsing becomes like navigating an abstract painting made of coloured, sometimes clickable, rectangles—an experience reminiscent of Alexei Shulgin's early classic net art<sup>(?)</sup> piece *Form Art* (1997) preserved in the collection of C3 Foundation (Center for Culture and Communication Foundation),<sup>115</sup> that uses in a playful way the formal elements of HTML without subsuming them to written texts or any kind of coherent, intelligible narratives.<sup>116</sup> Modifying the operation of commercial browsers, or creating new ways of browsing the internet is an ongoing theme in net art<sup>(?)</sup>, and it already has a quite rich history. Some significant early examples are discussed in Rachel Greene's widely read study *Internet Art* (2004), among them Mark Napier's *Riot* (1999)<sup>117</sup> a browser in which current users see 'debris' left in the browser window from previous users, creating a collective browsing experience, or *The Web Stalker* (1997-1998) by I/O/D (Matthew Fuller, Colin Green, Simon Pope)<sup>118</sup> that ignores images and formatting, to show only text, links and the connections between websites, 'offering views of web neighbourhoods' (Greene 2004, 100, 85).

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<sup>113</sup> Visit the work at <http://therevolvinginternetccw.alainbarthelemy.com/>, accessed 02.09.2018.

<sup>114</sup> Presentation of the work and links for downloading it at: <http://www.abstractbrowsing.net>, accessed 02.09.2018.

<sup>115</sup> Visit the work at: <http://www.c3.hu/collection/form/>, accessed 24.08.2018.

<sup>116</sup> Short presentation text of *Form Art* by Alexei Shulgin, on the C3 website, [http://www.c3.hu/collection/index\\_en.php?id=4](http://www.c3.hu/collection/index_en.php?id=4), accessed 24.08.2018.

<sup>117</sup> Visit the work at: <http://potatoland.org/riot/>, accessed 01.11.2018.

<sup>118</sup> Visit the work in [rhizome.org](http://rhizome.org)'s *Net Art Anthology*: <http://archive.rhizome.org/anthology/webstalker.html>, accessed 01.11.2018.

In all these works, as in *We See In Every Direction*, the spectator is still able to perform some of the gestures possible in a mainstream internet browser, but the atypical behaviour of the software precludes its utilitarian functions. Commercial browsers in order to facilitate the access to information strive to make the interaction with the software as seamless as possible, to effectively make the browser disappear to the greatest possible degree, to make surfing the internet feel natural. The mediation of the software and the hardware involved fades away: 'I' click on the link, 'I' open a webpage, 'I' navigate in the midst of online information. Yet, as Rosa Menkman notes, there is no immediate connection or communication, and “[w]hat makes every medium specific is *how* it fails to reach a state of complete transparent immediacy” (Menkman 2011, 65). The embodiment of this failure, at once a pointer towards the existence of the medium (against fantasies of immediacy) and a disturbance of the medium that throws it into its becoming, is, for Menkman, the glitch. But the glitch, Menkman insists, is not only technological, rather it has thick socio-cultural layers. When the rules of the game change, as happens for instance in *We See In Every Direction* by making the browsing collective, arguably exactly such a glitch happens which disturbs the expected relations between the user and the browser. The space of mediation thickens and becomes the center of attention: 'I' am pressing plastic buttons and stare into a screen, and an incomprehensible, uncanny gap opens between 'my' body and the actions that occur on-screen amidst the representation of digital signals. Suddenly, 'I' have no idea who clicks when 'I' click. Something happens in the space between my hand and the pointer moving on the screen. Or rather someone, somebody. (Or, fails to do so...). A glitch of sorts.

Who clicks when 'I' click? A complex assemblage is made present, a network of actions is performed in order for the click to happen. If we accept that our actions cannot be completely explained by the idea of 'human' agency, that nonhuman actants (in the vocabulary of Bruno

Latour)<sup>119</sup> or vibrant matter (in Jane Bennett's terms)<sup>120</sup> are factors that should be considered if we are to understand the agency beyond even the most simple gestures, then the image of the well defined 'human' body and the individuality and unity of the consciousness it grounds start fading away.

But even if we remain inside a humanist paradigm and ignore any other-than-human actants that are involved in performing the click, or that arise as a byproduct of the action performed, even then, we are forced to recognize a multitude of bodies that are involved in performing this simple gesture of moving the pointer in a browser window and clicking. In the interactions happening in the virtual space opened up on the screen the traditional 'human' body (meaning the kind of body required by a social, political and economic system built on humanist values; a clearly definable body contained by its skin, a recognizable figure that can be individually grasped by law systems, subjected by nation states and integrated as consumer in capitalist markets) is irrelevant, you cannot grasp the icons on the screen with your hands, you cannot use your feet to run from one corner of the webpage to the other. No click without the bodies of the workers that assembled the computer, no click without the bodies involved in producing the multiple layers of software involved, no click without the mathematicians, physicists, chemists and so on, without whose actions the computer would not have been there in the first place. The body re-presented (made present again) as a pointer on the screen is not the one of a remote user, it is an agglutination of the intentions, actions and knowledge of a large number of actants as archived in the hardware and software that make the existence of the pointer possible (and each of those actants is nothing but an assemblage of intensive differences). All of this becomes present as a divergent, heterogeneous body, with every movement of the pointer, with every event in the browser. A paradigm centered on the 'human'

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<sup>119</sup> See (Latour 1999).

<sup>120</sup> See (Bennett 2010).

subject as the site of agency, collapses beneath its own weight with every click, with every movement of the mouse cursor.

The performance of surfing the internet in *We See In Every Direction*, by bringing forth the thickness of the space of mediation, that exists as a dense interweaving of archived actions, instantiates and makes visible a body that is anything but 'human' and that moreover in its heterogeneity and multiplicity slips outside the grip of any personal pronoun. Possibly it is a body outside of the space of meaning accessible in language, an event somewhere at its borders, so that one can point towards it but never grasp it, an event that cannot really be mapped in language, that eludes the archive (while nonetheless happening upon the archival background). A target that the arrow can never reach. Nonetheless, this other-than-human body, that '*I am*' when engaging the work (in the sense that there is no 'I' without it, the 'I' emerges only upon and against this body; but then again the personal pronoun is out of tune, and does not manage to do justice to this divergent assemblage), tends to be read, understood as 'human'. What brings about the illusion, the fiction of 'humanity' upon this complex intermingling of agencies?

An illusion is not fake or groundless, quite on the contrary, it is a reading entirely dependent on its ground, entirely dependent on that which underlies it; a reading that emerges only from a specific angle, and as long as that angle is not significantly changed. The 'human' body is a narrative dependent on a specific metanarrative frame that conditions it and offers the rules for its emergence.

## **II.7. Human**

In an attempt to think surveillance beyond the panoptic model, in a Deleuze-Guattarian frame, Kevin D. Haggerty and Richard V. Ericson propose the idea of a *surveillant assemblage* which exists as a potentiality at the intersection of various media, a surveillance machine that is multiple,



unstable, without discernible boundaries, that emerges from multiple connections across a plethora of technologies and practices (Haggerty and Ericson 2000, 609). It is not clear if the *surveillant assemblage* does manage to go beyond the panoptic model, as its authors claim, or if it is merely a slightly updated reformulation of it. There is though a difference between the respective theories of the surveillant assemblage and the panopticon, that is relevant for our discussion. It has to do with the implications of surveillance on the object being surveilled.

For Haggerty and Ericson 'the body is itself, then, an assemblage comprised of myriad component parts and processes which are broken-down for purposes of observation' (Haggerty and Ericson 2000, 613). And that accurately covers half of the problem. The second half. The question that they ignore is how come this body *is* in the first place? What is it that brings together the 'myriad component parts' forming this body that is in the process of being broken-down? It is not enough to notice that the observed body is a hybrid composition, that it is torn apart by the surveillance apparatus, one also has to ask what is it that coagulates these heterogeneous parts together as the 'human' body that is to be observed, in the first place. Arguably that is the main point of Foucault's theory of the panopticon in *Discipline and Punish*, that the individual—in my reading, its very body—is formed by the power apparatus, by the surveillance system, as the object of this surveillance, that it is not a 'natural' given prior to the relations of power in which it is inscribed and that inscribe themselves on it. The panopticon, or the surveillant assemblage, is that which brings the figure of the 'human' together, while at the same time breaking it apart. The system of power creates its object, does not discover it somewhere out there in Nature. The 'human' is the excretion of the panoptic surveillance, and panoptic surveillance, in its violence, is geared towards the (re-)production of the 'human'.

'Human' bodies find their contours by pushing against the aggressive force of the gaze. In other words they come forth, they come into being already under surveillance. They happen in confronting the impersonal normative gaze. The impersonal gaze, which is my own gaze, and which instantiates the whole panoptic machine. Mirror stage. Being subjected to one's own gaze, to the impersonal normative gaze in one's own eyes. And then there is something that is cut out, that is ignored and thrown away so that the 'human' frame can fit in.

The 'human' body is a work that has to be *formed*, an agglutination of 'myriad components' that need a force in-between in order to keep them together. The human *form* is in need of a frame. Derrida, in his reading of Kant's *Critique of Judgement*, argues that every *work (oeuvre)* needs an *outside-of-work (hors d'oeuvre)*, that every *ergon* is brought into being by a *parergon*. For Derrida the parergon is that which belongs to the ergon, the work, as a surplus or a supplement, neither work nor outside work, but which nonetheless, from its marginal position, gives rise to the work (Derrida [1978] 1987, 9). The parergon is that which separates the work from its context, bringing it forth. From outside it pertains to the inside, from inside it is part of the outside, 'an ill-detachable detachment' says Derrida (Derrida [1978] 1987, 59), that emerges against two grounds and with respect to each of them it merges into the other (Derrida [1978] 1987, 61). *We See In Every Direction*—read through Bourriaud's theory of forms in relational aesthetics, and further considering the role of the gaze in the formation of the subject as it can be understood from Foucault's take on surveillance as panoptic system—allows us to see a historically (and technologically) contingent normative gaze playing the role of the parergon and bringing into existence our own<sup>(?)</sup> 'human' bodies, as works of art, as fictions, fragile assemblages always on the point of losing their cohesion.

Haggerty and Ericson use a literary reference to delineate their understanding of the interplay between bodies and technology and its historical unfolding:

In the figure of a body assembled from the parts of different corpses, Mary Shelly's *Frankenstein* spoke to early-modern anxieties about the potential consequences of unrestrained science and technology. [...] Today, however, we are witnessing the formation and coalescence of a new type of body, a form of becoming which transcends human corporeality and reduces flesh to pure information. Culled from the tentacles of the surveillant assemblage, this new body is our 'data double' [...] (Haggerty and Ericson 2000, 613)

In the framework proposed here, as I already pointed out, today's technologies before 'transcending the human corporeality and reducing flesh to pure information', as Haggerty and Erikson put it, create the 'human' corporeality. Just as *Frankenstein* created his monster. The 'human' is created and torn apart in the very same gesture. The horror stories of modernity are far from being over. If anything, they are intensified. Each of us plays at the same time both the role of *Frankenstein* and that of his monster. The 'mass public surveillance', the omnipresent normative gaze that each of us instantiates, *forms* our monstrous 'human' body and chops up a complex assemblage to fit the contours that the humanist metanarrative requires. At the very same time we are ourselves the bearers of this gaze that stitches our grotesque 'human' bodies together out of a divergent multiplicity.

If the panopticon in its (re)productive function operates now just as much as it did during modernity, and if its product is the same obsolete 'human' body, then what is it that is different about surveillance in our digitalized societies? Matthew Fuller distinguishes between two models of

surveillance, one working in a disciplinarian society (Foucault's panopticon), and one operating in what Deleuze describes as societies of control (Fuller 2005, 148). If in the first model a homogenous body is produced, in the second one: '[s]ocial ordering moves into a mode that is characterized by a series of overlapping procedures of modulation. Life, activity, becomes a flowing force that is gated, transduced, filtered, recombined, rendered positive as if it were a stream of data' (Fuller 2005, 148). Surveillance now produces 'flecks of identity', that exist like standard objects (standardized data packages) in databases (Fuller 2005, 148).<sup>121</sup> However, it is important to notice that the two models do not exclude one another, but on the contrary act as supplements for each other.

The 'flecks of identity' point towards the sovereign subject and only in doing so can they have efficiency as tools of control. The society of control relies on stable identities, the 'flecks of identity' are at the same time elements of a centripetal movement away from the sovereign subject (a sovereign subject that can be seen only in retrospect), and elements of a centrifugal movement towards this same obsolete target that they left behind, towards this past postulated as a necessary future. Hence desperate campaigns led by virtually all tech giants to link online activity back with 'real persons', that is with 'human' bodies constructed after the modern model. The good citizen and the good consumer, the desired products of national state and corporate capital surveillance, are necessarily the same 'human' figure defined by the paragon that is the humanist ideology harbored by the gaze. That is, the surveillance in societies of control still has as its goal the production of the 'human' figure that can exist only under the panoptic regime (the regime that produces sovereign embodied subjects around the central, faceless, impersonal, anonymous gaze).

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<sup>121</sup> For Fuller's theorization of 'standard objects' see (Fuller 2005, 93-107, 129-131).

There is a difference of direction between the affordances of digital technologies to deterritorialize the sovereign subject and the 'flecks of identity' that freeze the flows of deterritorialization and aim back towards this past that never came to be, disguised as a necessary future—the phantasma of the subject identical to itself, the ghost of the embodied 'human' subject. The 'human' is an illusion of the inexistent gaze at the centre of the panoptic machine, an illusion that each of us makes real, projecting it on the other (including the other that oneself<sup>(?)</sup> is) by embodying this abstract gaze. The 'human' is an optical illusion and it does not make much sense of talking about the 'human' figure, except from a visual perspective (in the system of representation based on recognition). What changes with the contemporary digital condition is that this illusion is more and more groundless, and that it starts to be more and more obvious that it does not quite hold, that it never quite made sense. Thus the surveillance apparatus is more and more extended and more and more oppressive in order to impose the ground that the 'human' lacks. The affordances of digital networks and the 'human' figure are at odds. Not because the 'natural' embodied 'human' subject is now deconstructed by digital technology, but simply because it cannot be neatly constructed in the first place. Hence the increasing brutality of its inertial, groundless, imposition.

## **II.8. <strike>Human</strike>**

For Bourriaud, form (in the reading that I propose, including one's own<sup>(?)</sup> body) 'only assumes its texture (and only acquires a real existence) when it introduces human interactions' (Bourriaud 2002, 9). In the argument sketched here on the other hand, labeling 'human' that which in their interaction produce forms, including the form of their own<sup>(?)</sup> bodies, is a hasty gesture that lacks any solid justification. What is 'human' to the interaction prior to the humanity of the forms that interact, prior to the forms that are created through this interaction? What is 'human' prior to the 'human' body? Bourriaud's account seems to presume 'human' subjectivities or consciousnesses that in their interaction produce the forms of their own bodies. I'm taking a step back and refuse the

anthropocentric tendency of presupposing a self-evident, abstract humanness that preexists its embodied form. As such, the meaning of 'the human' gets to be localized in the cut that produces the 'human' form, in the frame that brings the 'human' body forward. With Bourriaud, the 'human' form appears in the encounter, however against Bourriaud, this encounter does not have anything 'human' in it, it might excrete the 'human', but is not itself 'human' nor does it happen between 'human' consciousnesses prior to their embodiment.

What is at stake in works of relational art (and I claim that *We See In Every Direction* can be understood in this light), in the encounters that challenge the institutionally reinforced rules of interaction, is the very form of the bodies that emerge from these encounters, thus their 'humanity'. But, it is not, as Bourriaud claims, that in the interstices of the capitalist market the 'human' in its richness is discovered. On the contrary, when the rules are challenged, the 'human' seems to be disturbed with them. Namely, outside the dictates of socio-politico-economic systems centered on the figure of the 'human' and requiring its (re)production in every encounter, the bodies that emerge in the aftermath of what comes to be understood as their performance, do not fit immediately in humanist definitions. They have to be forced into that frame by the panoptic surveillance.

The ambition of this project is to attend to the violence of this imposition of 'human' contours, and to mourn what dies when we model ourselves to fit the definition of the 'human'. But, in order to do so, we need a way to refer to this fictional, yet very real, 'human' body, a way that would bring to the fore its artificiality. We need a way to refer to the 'human' that would mark both the violence that the gaze exercises upon the body breaking it apart and the fact that it is this violent gaze (in its technological and political specificity) that stitches it together, that introduces the politically reinforced humanist narrative as the frame that imposes a 'human' form upon a complex flow of intensities. I am searching for a way to foreground the compositeness of the 'human', to mark the

aggressiveness of the events that make it happen and that at the very same time tear it apart, I am searching for a way to tag the 'human' with the violence inherent in tracing its contours, for a way of making visible its cuts and stitches.

One possible mode of doing this, the one that I will test for the remainder of this project, is to print the 'human' between the HTML tags that would produce a strikethrough: `<strike>human</strike>`. If nothing else, at least the monstrosity, the compositeness, the inadequacy, the ugliness(?) of the bodies that we claim to be (to have?), will be (im)mediately present in the discourse. The `<strike>` tag was already deprecated in HTML4 and it is obsolete in HTML5. The current specifications recommend using `<del>` or `<s>` tags for the strikethrough,<sup>122</sup> but the obsolete tag (coming with the warning that browser support is limited and it may produce unexpected results) suits our purpose well, it reminds us of the glitches (failures) that we are to expect when representing ourselves(?) as 'humans'.

The desired output: ~~human~~, would have somewhat pointed to the practice of putting a term under erasure, used by Derrida in *Of Grammatology*—Derrida borrows this device from Heidegger—in order to mark a concept that is necessary, yet inaccurate (Spivak 1997, xiv). Without claiming to stay true to neither Derrida nor Heidegger's use of the erasure, for us it would have had a two-fold meaning: first it would have been a sign of the problems inherent in the concept, an attempt to keep the ~~human~~ open as a question, a mnemonic device to prevent us from forgetting the other-than-human assemblages forced in the ~~human~~ frame; and second it would have been a marker of the panoptic machine which brings the ~~human~~ into being, while breaking it apart. The 'human' emerges only through its erasure.

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<sup>122</sup> See the entry for the 'strike' element in the current HTML specification, the 'HTML Living standard', at <https://html.spec.whatwg.org/#strike>. Accessed 22.06.2021.

By using the obsolete HTML tags instead of directly putting the term under erasure, I aim to foreground the specificity of this gesture of erasing (without erasing). The ~~human~~ bodies are dependent on a particular technology, and always already on the point of being left behind, of becoming obsolete. We are never sure that the tags will do their job, that the frames will produce the desired 'human' form, that the stitches will manage to keep this body together. Also, the 'human' is not a harmless concept, and it never was throughout its history. It comes with a price, arguably a very high one. Something is lost, something is killed, something is wounded in order for the 'human' frame to fit in. I do not want to forget this violence. The  stands for it, it hits and slashes for the ~~human~~ to make sense.

How will our contemporary horror stories develop if the monstrosity of our own bodies comes forth through the erasure? Let's not forget in a blind spot, under the white erasing tape, the maybe significant detail that what is separating us, *Victors*, from our defeated monsters is still an *aesthetic* ideal. What happened in the incommensurable time that lapsed between the fictitious body of an eighteenth century scientist and our equally fictitious twenty-first century bodies is that they slid between two related meanings of the *aesthetics*. From *aesthetics* as a discourse on beauty to the *aesthetics* as discourse on *aisthesis*—sense perception. *Victor* was ~~human~~ because he was beautiful, the monster was not. So the monster had to die, it should have never been born. *Victor* is ~~human~~ because he senses, the (technological) monster does not. Or... does it? Will it?



## Chapter III: Individuation and Individuals

The previous chapter proposed that in the process of net art<sup>(?)</sup> specta(c)torship the <strike>human</strike> body, one's own<sup>(?)</sup> body, is (de)constructed in a crisis of identity upon the background of an affective problematic of dynamic intensities. In other words, the embodied thinking subject in its (im)materiality is constructed and deconstructed upon the affective intensive background as an interplay of matter and meaning conditioned by a specific technological, political, social, etc., context. The parergon that frames the body of the spectator into the figure of the modern 'human' is, I proposed, a contemporary digitalized version of the panoptic gaze, and net art<sup>(?)</sup> specta(c)torship problematizes this very framing, throws it into crisis.

It is in the space of this crisis of identity that we will commence our critical reading of Gilbert Simondon's theory of individuation. The aim is not to solve the crisis, but on the contrary, to keep it open in all its absurdity. The eventual purpose of this exercise is to formulate, from a perspective built on a (mis)reading of the theory of individuation, an understanding of the problematic (de)construction of the <strike>human</strike> body as it happens in net art<sup>(?)</sup> specta(c)torship. The present chapter is a first step in this direction. Nevertheless we will have to take a detour through the problematic of the (an)archive in *Chapter IV*,<sup>123</sup> and to elaborate on the question of psychic individuation in *Chapter V*, in order to complete this task. Building on the arguments of *Chapter II*, one of the main concerns here is the intertwined becoming of matter and meaning with respect to the figure of the individual.

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<sup>123</sup> Addressing the problematic of the (an)archive will be necessary in order to examine the dynamics of the folding of the phenomenological plane into the ontogenetic beginning.

### III.1. General Remark

Simondon's project is grounded in a critique of the (western) philosophical tradition and of its inability to think *being* as *becoming*. The history of philosophy is, for Simondon, an oscillation between 'substantialism' and 'hylomorphism',<sup>124</sup> both of which explain *being* only by inadvertently presupposing the existence of *individual beings*, thus collapsing into a vicious circle by postulating (implicitly or explicitly) the existence of the *individual being* that they seek to explain (Simondon [1958] 2013, 23-4).<sup>125</sup> The alternative that Simondon proposes is, by contrast, an effort to think *being* on the basis of its *becoming*, an effort to attend to the process by which the individual—a concept that for Simondon designates anything from a crystal, to a biological entity all the way to <strike>human<strike> beings and to technological objects—becomes what it (never quite) is, without presupposing an ontological priority of the *individual being* over its *becoming*. It is this process of emergence of the *individual being* that is called 'individuation', and it is only by way of the process of individuation that the individual *is* and can be understood. The ontological problematic becomes for Simondon an ontogenetic one. As Muriel Combes explains it:

As such, being can be adequately known only from its middle, by seizing it at its center (*by way of* the operation of individuation and not *on the basis of* the term of this operation). Simondon's approach entails a substitution of ontogenesis for traditional

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<sup>124</sup> Substantialism is in this context a philosophical tradition that considers beings as existing in themselves, as self-sufficient unities, or as assemblages of self-sufficient unities. One of the main branches of this tradition is atomism, which presupposes minimal individual particles (the atoms) of which all beings are composed. Hylomorphism, on the other hand, explains being as a composition of form and matter, as formed matter, opposing a sort of bipolar schema to the monism of substantialism. For substantialism and hylomorphism see (Simondon [1958] 2013, 23).

<sup>125</sup> Also see in this sense Muriel Combes' reading of Simondon (Combes 2013, 1).

ontology, grasping the genesis of individuals within the operation of individuation as it is unfolding. (Combes 2013, 2-3)

My attempt in the following pages, is to offer a critical reading of Simondon's system in order to establish the conditions for a theoretical understanding of net art<sup>(?)</sup> specta(c)torship as a process of individuation. It is not immediately possible to formulate this position in the Simondonian framework, since both Simondon's theory of technological objects and the divergent opinions on art<sup>(?)</sup> and aesthetics that he formulates<sup>126</sup>—the two closest instances in his work to the questions addressed in this project—are at odds with the understanding of net art<sup>(?)</sup> specta(c)torship that starts to gain contour here. It will take a folding of Simondon's theory upon itself, and indeed against itself, in order to sketch the individuating potentials at play in this process.

Thinking specta(c)torship as a process of individuation will entail a radical change of perspective... Or, more exactly, two radical changes of perspective. First, from the point of view of 'art theory' discourse, the disturbance consists in an attempt to attend to the reality of relations rather than to subsume them to the ipseity of individuals. Thus, the task at hand is to understand specta(c)torship away from a paradigm in which the individual is always already presupposed as known. Thinking specta(c)torship is not about deciphering the relation between an embodied <strike>human</strike> subject and a work of art<sup>(?)</sup>, but rather about tracing the ways in which specta(c)torship—as a process of individuation—produces a corporeality that can be (mis)read as a <strike>human</strike> subject relating with a work of art<sup>(?)</sup>. Whatever '<strike>human</strike>' and 'work of art<sup>(?)</sup>' could mean. In other words, what is at stake is to affirm the (relative) reality of relations and to follow their consequences, namely the individuated beings that they (never quite) produce: the

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<sup>126</sup> I am referring to Simondon's two main works *L'Individuation à la Lumière des Notions de Forme et d'Information* ([1958] 2013), and *Du Mode d'Existence des Objets Techniques* ([1958] 1989).

embodied subject and the object. Second, from the perspective of the theory of individuation, the disturbance will consist in proposing specta(c)torship as an essential moment of the process of individuation—and not only an essential moment of the process of psychic individuation, but as well of physical and vital individuation: *being*, *becoming* and the possibility of (erroneously) understanding *being* in its *becoming* are grounded in processes of specta(c)torship (this is the absurd claim of this text).

But first, let us take some time to understand what it means to think *being* as *becoming* and to unpack the premisses of the theory of individuation.

### **III.2. Pre-Individual Being, Individuation, and Individuated Being**

For Simondon, *being* cannot be grasped independent of *becoming*, *being* is not in itself and cannot be understood in itself. In Brian Massumi's reading—in accordance with many other commentators of Simondon's work—the concept of *individuation* 'asserts the primacy of ontogenesis, a primacy of processes of becoming over the states of being through which they pass' (Massumi 2012, 20). There is nonetheless the risk of an overstatement in this emphasis on *becoming* over *being*. It is important to notice that for Simondon *becoming* is not something that precedes and envelops *being* but is rather an aspect of *being* (Simondon [1958] 2013, 25). It is not the case that *being* is produced by *becoming*, but rather that being *is* inasmuch as it becomes, that becoming is a dimension of *being*; ontogenesis does not produce *being* out of nothingness, it operates already within *being*, so to speak, but in an unstructured *being* brimming with yet un-actualized potentialities.<sup>127</sup>

Jean-Hugues Barthélémy observes that the understanding of *becoming* in Simondon, with its accent on the 'priority of ontogenesis'—that is, the priority of the question of ontogenesis over those of

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<sup>127</sup> See Muriel Combes's reading in this sense (Combes 2013, 3-4).

ontology and critical philosophy, and not strictly speaking the priority of *becoming* over *being* (see above)—is borrowed from the philosophy of Henri Bergson. For Barthélémy, one of the main differences between the understanding of *becoming* in Simondon and Bergson regards the modality of overcoming the dualism between mechanism and vitalism, and the status of technique and science in their respective systems (Barthélémy 2005, 18). It is the first aspect that interests us at this early stage in the argumentation. As Barthélémy observes, while for Bergson the physical and the vital are grounded in a common source that is *spiritual*, for Simondon, beyond the physical and the vital there is merely the pre-physical and the pre-vital, the *pre-individual* which in no way could be confused with the *spiritual*, but should be understood only as that which precedes individuation (Barthélémy 2005, 39-41).

Thus, a paradoxical split occurs in the very meaning of *being*, a distinction (that proliferates uncontrollably) between *individuated being* (or rather *being* in the process of individuation) and *pre-individual being*, that is, between *being* in the process of individuation and *being* 'prior' to individuation or ontogenesis. Yet, importantly, 'prior' is not a satisfactory term in this case, since time and space emerge in individuation and consequently there is properly speaking no 'prior' of

*individuation*.<sup>128</sup> We find ourselves already in the midst of an aporia: the necessity to think a 'prior' without time, an 'outside' without space.

**The *pre-individual being***—*being* without being (i.e. without having an *actual* existence, neither matter nor energy, neither wave nor particle), *being* that is not in time and space but produces time and space, *being* that has yet to be brought into being, and however the proper meaning of 'being', *being* as such—is defined at its most basic (yet most abstract) level as the primary and original metastability of the real ('la métastabilité primitive et originelle du réel'), an original 'real' capable of manifesting itself as wave or particle, matter or energy (Simondon [1958] 2013, 26-7).

The metastability of the 'real', the metastability of *pre-individual being* refers to the initial heterogeneity of the potentialities that it harbours (Simondon [1958] 2013, 26),<sup>129</sup> and constitutes the condition *sine qua non* of individuation. From this angle, the individuation is nothing but the emergence and becoming of a point of mediation between incompatible orders of the 'real', a partial solution to the incompatibility of *pre-individual being* with itself—a dynamic partial solution to the pre-individual problematic. Yet the problematic always remains to a certain extent part of its partial solutions, every individual carries with it a charge of pre-individual problematic, a diagrammatic

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<sup>128</sup> See (Barthélémy 2012, 222). In this sense, 'preindividual being', the term used by Simondon, is a misnomer, the preposition 'pre-' indicates an impossible 'before'; the hyphenation of the 'pre-individual' in some of the English language discussions of Simondon further accentuates this self-contradiction. This problem is not without consequences, since one of the main difficulties of Simondon's system is to show how knowledge has access to 'pre-individual' being, to a realm by definition outside the grasp of individuated thought. And in its first move thinking cannot help but introduce the order of time ('pre-') into a field that is supposed to be independent of both time and space. Is it possible at all to write about something that is constitutively 'prior' to all knowledge? I will use the hyphenated version of the term in order to highlight the problematic of this self-contradictory movement of knowledge.

<sup>129</sup> See also (Combes 2013, 4).

space of potentiality that affords, and conditions, its *becoming*. *Being* is dephased with respect to itself in this process, says Simondon, that is, it changes its state (see Combes 2013, 4), the system of potentialities is organized in successive configurations affected by the mediation that the individual (never quite) is.

What is produced in individuation is at the same time the individual as mediation and its *associated milieu*, the region of the pre-individual problematic that it becomes together with and that it cannot be separated from—this is the pre-individual as a diagrammatic space of potentiality associated with the individual, and that affords its *becoming*, its *being* (while at the very same time the pre-individual remains the aporetic 'prior' of individuation).

Vincent Bontems and Christian de Ronde argue—in a fascinating article that touches on the possibility of reading Simondon's theory of individuation with respect to contemporary scientific understanding of quantum mechanics—that Simondon's pre-individual hypothesis provides a way of formulating a realistic but non-substantialist interpretation of the orthodox quantum formalism. They consider the quantum wave function  $\Psi$  as an objective formal description of the pre-individual realm, and understand quantum possibilities in terms of potentialities distinct and independent from their actualization (Bontems and de Ronde 2019, 620).<sup>130</sup>

While I am in no position of commenting upon the pertinence, or lack thereof, of Bontems and de Ronde's argument with respect to quantum theory, nonetheless, there are two points that should be

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<sup>130</sup> This perspective, Bontems and de Ronde claim, is free from the paradoxes of Quantum Mechanics as they appear in the view of classical logic (the classical logic that is also inherent in classical physics) which is grounded on a substantialist ontology that privileges existence, identity and non-contradiction. (Bontems and de Ronde 2019, 614-6, 619-21)

emphasized here: first, the possible relevance of Simondon's theory for fundamental contemporary scientific debates (which suggests the necessity of closely addressing Simondon's theory in philosophical/miso-sophic terms, such as this text attempts to do); second, the importance of the question regarding the limits inherent in trying to understand the *pre-individual*. The strive to think beyond individuality, as it is suggested in Deleuze's critique of the dogmatic image of thought, necessarily implies thinking beyond the system of representation (an impossible thinking to be sure), that is to say thinking beyond language (including mathematical language), beyond the possibility of the one consistent with itself (beyond the possibility of the mathematical unit, beyond the possibility of the '='). A formula can go a long way in deconstructing representation (thus individuality), yet is never outside the system of representation. Which is not to say that a formal description of the pre-individual is not possible, but rather exactly that: that it is possible, that it is itself an actualization, that it will necessarily be inconsistent with itself in the light of the pre-individual potentialities that it tries to explain—thus the absurd, aporetic 'pre-' as a vector that always points towards the outside of that which comes to be comprehended (in philosophical language, as well as in mathematical language). The relevance of Bontems and de Ronde's text (also) resides in their acknowledgement of these inherent limits in thinking the pre-individual:

[...] it is conceivable that no mathematical tool would be able to describe the preindividual itself but only the individuation process [...] However, as it stands, it is the Schrödinger equation which might be considered to be the best available formalization when attempting to understand the preindividual realm Simondon talks about. In this respect, special attention has to be paid to the wave function,  $\Psi$ , the solution of Schrödinger's equation which—according to Born—represents a strange “wave of real quantum possibilities” interacting in a configuration space—a space, let



us remark, that cannot be interpreted in terms of classical space-time. (Bontems and de Ronde 2019, 617)

Understanding the pre-individual in the terms of the Schrödinger equation, is one particular way of gaining access to thinking the pre-individual from within the individuation process and in terms that (unavoidably) emerge in individuation. It is an attempt of understanding the 'original metastability of the real' beyond the logic of the individual consistent with itself, but while it can deconstruct the individual, it cannot step outside of the process of the becoming of the individual (individuation). Exactly inasmuch as this always already describes an individuation process (rather than describing *being* 'prior' to individuation), it cannot be a definitive formalization of the meaning of the pre-individual, but rather a form of situated knowledge dependent on the process of individuation through which it emerges.<sup>131</sup>

Simondon proposes (at least) two different understandings of the pre-individual that are strictly speaking incompatible with each other. On the one hand the pre-individual names the space of potentiality that grounds the emergence of all physical forces, entities and relations between them. On the other hand, with respect to the process of *physical individuation* (that will be discussed in more detail shortly) the *pre-individual being* tends to be described as 'the energetic ground of individuation', a field of potential energies that cannot be said to be *one* and neither to be identical with itself, nonetheless a field of potential energies that is strictly interrelated with a type of materiality (Simondon [1958] 2013, 63-6)—and at times one encounters in Simondon's discussion

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<sup>131</sup> This is not a conclusion regarding the 'proper' way of understanding quantum theory (I do not have any claim in this respect, I am simply exposing Bontems and de Ronde's position). Rather my point is about the inherent limits of knowledge with respect to the pre-individual—and Bontems and de Ronde's position supports this argument.

of physical individuation even concepts such as 'pre-individual matter' (Simondon [1958] 2013, 45, note 6). In this case, obviously, the pre-individual is accounted for in terms of potential energy or even in terms of its materiality, in contradiction with being that which affords matter and energy in the first place.

Simondon is not oblivious to this contradiction. The attempt to solve it results in a split in the meaning of the pre-individual 'real', a split between domains of the 'real' where no individuation took place and domains of the real that are complementary to an individual if considered as separate from the individual (Simondon [1958] 2013, 65). Which would mean for our discussion, on the one hand a pre-individual that harbours the potentiality of something like matter and energy, wave or particle, particles and/or their respective fields (and there are problematic theoretical jumps between these pairs), and on the other hand a pre-individual that is the necessary complement of any individual, its reserve of becoming that makes the individual what it (never quite) is: pre-individual potential energies with respect to matter, the pre-individual matter with respect to the in-formed materiality of the individual etc.

It is not simply a case of different passages of Simondon's discourse being incompatible with one-another, but of an essential problem inherent in the theory of individuation: any formulation of *being* 'before' individuation (in mathematical or philosophical language) cannot be but tentative and in the last instance erroneous (with respect to the pre-individual), yet everything *is* and *is understood* as and because of this erring.

What remains constant is the movement of thought beyond the presupposed identity with itself of the individual, that is, beyond recognition and representation, a movement of thought that we described above, in Deleuze's terms as miso-sophic. Thus, I propose that the 'pre-' of the pre-

individual should be understood not only as an objective ground of individuation but also as a vector for a movement of thought against itself, for the impossible yet necessary attempt of formulating that which is not possible to formulate. Not possible to formulate because that which is recoverable in the formula (be it philosophical or mathematical) that which is actualized as knowledge (or *actual being* for that matter) cannot recover the pre-individual as such, simply because there is no pre-individual 'as such', yet everything that *is* and *is known* is nothing but the 'dephasing' of the pre-individual with respect to... itself<sup>(??)</sup>, nothing but the process of individuation. The *absolute origin*, the metastable *being* before individuation can exist only as a *lack of origin*: the aporetic 'pre-' of the pre-individual as a movement of miso-sophic thinking.

What becomes conspicuous is that the problem of individuation, the problem of the passage between *pre-individual being* and the individual, will have to be at the same time the problem of ontogenesis that accounts for *being* as *becoming* and something like an epistemology or even a phenomenology (it will turn out to be a *phenomenogenesis*) that will have to account at the very same time for the possibility of thinking (erroneously!) individuation and the pre-individual while being always already in a process of individuation.<sup>132</sup>

So, how does **individuation** work? For Simondon, individuation moves by means of *transduction*, an operation through which an action propagates to its immediate vicinity (Simondon [1958] 2013, 32). The emphasis on *transduction* stresses that the result of individuation is not already presupposed at the moment when the process starts, that there is no virtual plan or principle that is to become actual. It is essential for Simondon to deny the possibility of such a principle or plan that

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<sup>132</sup> For Simondon's take on the question of how it is possible to think the pre-individual and the process of individuation see (Simondon [1958] 2013, 36). My position already takes here a significantly different direction.

would condition individuation, and indeed to deny the possibility of anything at all in the pre-individual metastable state that would foretell the *individuated being*. What Simondon reproaches both substantialism and hylomorphism is exactly that by taking the individual as their starting point, they are falling into equating the problem of individuation with the search for a principle of individuation (Simondon [1958] 2013, 24-5).<sup>133</sup> That is, instead of dealing with individuation on its own terms, the philosophical tradition is merely searching for something in individuation (a principle of individuation) that would explain the emergence and being of the individual which is presupposed as given, thus deforming and misunderstanding both ontogenetic process and *pre-individual being* in the name of the individual seen as a telos.

For Simondon: 'dans l'être avant tout devenir, c'est la puissance du devenir résolutif qui est contenue, par l'incompatibilité qu'il pourra compatibiliser, mais non la ligne d'existence de ce devenir, qui n'est pas déjà donné et ne peut être préformé, parce que la problématique est sans phases' (Simondon [1958] 2013, 315).<sup>134</sup> The direction of the individuation process is utterly unknown before the process is already under way, creating the individual by jumping from phase to phase, from partial resolution to partial resolution. That is, the direction of individuation is unknown before the individual.

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<sup>133</sup> See also Combes' explanation (Combes 2013, 1-2).

<sup>134</sup> My translation: 'in the being before any becoming, it is the power [puissance] of a resolute becoming that is contained, through the incompatibility that it will be able to make compatible, but not the line of this becoming's existence, which is not already given and that cannot be pre-formed, because the problematic is without phases'.

For this and all subsequent translations from Simondon's *L'Individuation*, I am consulting the recently published english translation by Taylor Adkins, and revising my translations in relation to it. Nonetheless, in order to preserve the nuances of the text that I am interested in, I will provide the French version in-text and my translation in the notes, instead of directly using Adkins' version.

The process of individuation is not teleological, it does not unfold towards an end, neither does it happen by virtue of a *principle of individuation* that could foreshadow its orientation. The *sense*—the direction—of individuation emerges inasmuch as the individuation is already under way, it is not something that is given beforehand. Inasmuch as *becoming* flows, it determines to a certain extent the course of its own flow, in the given parameters set up by the problematic that puts it into motion. Patterns emerge, but they are traces carved in *being* (or as *being*) by the flows of *becoming*, not absolute a priori conditions that foretell the direction (*sense*) of *becoming*, and neither means of a definitive understanding (*sense*) of *being*—because *being* is always already *becoming*. Overflows are always possible. The individuation is not predetermined, but neither is it completely arbitrary—it moves as the improbable becoming of a diagrammatic space of potentialities recursively striated by the actual results that it produces.

As a consequence, **the individual** is for Simondon relative. That is, it is merely the result of a process of individuation, dependent on its specific conditions, and does not have any kind of absolute reality prior or posterior to the *becoming* that produces it. The individual, in itself, is not quite real, it never quite comes to be—the individual is an ongoing process of individuation. If our claim that specta(c)torship can be understood as a process of individuation is justifiable (which is still to be discussed), then what is at stake in light of this insight is to affirm the relativity of our own reality as spectators, as embodied subjects, with respect to the process of specta(c)torship. But that is still out of reach at this point.

For now, let us note more generally, following Simondon, the two aspects of the relativity of the individual. The individual is relative 'parce qu'il n'est pas tout l'être, et parce qu'il résulte d'un état de l'être en lequel il n'existait ni comme individu ni comme principe d'individuation' (Simondon

[1958] 2013, 25).<sup>135</sup> The first of these aspects was already discussed above: the individual emerges through transduction, in a process of individuation, from a pre-individual being. The individual is relative (i.e. not absolute) because it is a circumstantial result of individuation, it does not exist in the *pre-individual being* neither as an individual, nor as a principle of individuation. From the same perspective (its emergence as the result of a process of individuation) the individual is relative in yet another sense: it is literally a product of relations and dependent on the relations that it emerges from.<sup>136</sup> The individual is produced by individuation and it *reflects*, says Simondon, (*expresses*, I would rather say, closer to Deleuze's critical circumspection of visual metaphors that might inadvertently introduce the problematic of recognition and with it the dogmatic image of thought) in its characteristics the particularities of the process that brought it into being (Simondon [1958] 2013, 24). One could say—although Simondon does not go down this path—that the individual is (the tracing of) the trace of its own *becoming*, the trace that the dynamic *becoming* of a system of relations is leaving in its wake (at the very moment when it is traced).

The other aspect in Simondon's formulation of the relative reality of the *individual*, has to do with the fact that the individual is not *being* in its entirety. The emphasis is in this case on the fact that the individuating process does not produce an independent individual, but the couple individual-associated milieu; individuation is not only the becoming of the *individual being*, but of the *individual being* in relation to its environment, in relation to its diagrammatic space of potentiality. And this problematic of the relation between the individual and its associated milieu in the process of individuation is one of the aspects that allow us to distinguish between different stages of individuation.

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<sup>135</sup> The individual is relative 'because it is not the entire being, and because it results from a state of being in which it has not existed, neither as individual, nor as principle of individuation' [my translation].

<sup>136</sup> See Parikka's understanding of individuation in *Insect Media*, discussed in the *Introduction*.

But first, let us recapitulate: the process of individuation mediates between an aporetic *pre-individual being* and relative *individual beings* that, strictly speaking, never quite come to be (the mediation creates the 'realities' that it mediates). The *pre-individual* has to be understood at the same time as the ground of individuation and as a movement of thinking (a problematic pertaining to the process of psychic individuation discussed below). Thus, individuation, at its most basic level, has to account not only for ontogenesis, but also for the possibility of understanding and formulating ontogenesis. Also, this section argued that individuation is not teleological and does not follow a pre-existing plan; and that the individual is relative in two ways: on the one hand it is the ongoing result of a process of individuation in which it does not pre-exist neither as an individual nor as a principle of individuation, and on the other hand it is not *being* in its entirety, but only one half of the process of individuation—the other half being the associated milieu, the environment.

We will proceed now one step further, unpacking the different stages of the process of individuation in view of this second aspect of the relativity of the individual.

### III.3. Physical and Vital Individuation

Individuation is for Simondon a process that is responsible for the genesis of every physical *individual being*. The paradigmatic example of physical individuation—and to some extent, by *analogy*, the paradigm of all forms of individuation—is the process of crystallization.<sup>137</sup>

An oversaturated solution encounters a compatible seed that sets off the crystallization process by precipitating the formation of the first crystalline structures; subsequently the already formed crystal plays the role of the seed and continues to grow as the crystallization happens at its margins. In Simondon's vocabulary this is the case of a pre-individual amorphous *being*, in a metastable state, brimming with potential energy, that encounters an *analogous singularity* which sets off the

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<sup>137</sup> Esra Atamer argues that the process of crystallization, inasmuch as it results in a stable equilibrium, misrepresents the process of individuation because it suggests an incorrect boundary between physical and vital individuation. Atamer proposes to consider the emergence of *dissipative structures* (as understood in Isabelle Stengers and Ilya Prigogine's collaborative work) as the paradigmatic example of physical individuation in order to emphasize that physical individuals are open systems in continuous exchange with their environment, rather than closed systems, and thus to further blur the border between physical and vital individuation, and also to underline that transduction (the process by which individuation operates) supposes non-linear relations that undermine the principle of identity at the very moment when identity (the individual as open system) is (not quite) produced (Atamer 2011).

I will go on here discussing Simondon's (erroneous) paradigm of physical individuation, while being aware that an eventual reading focussing on dissipative structures as primary examples of physical individuation could potentially provide different insights into this problematic. What such an alternative reading could not do though, and this is essential for us, is to provide a stable meaning for *identity* from within the ontogenetic framework (the impossibility of providing such a meaning is the hinge of the framework constructed in this work). Quite on the contrary, Atamer's argument, further underlines the paradox of the emergence of identity that this text is interested in.



process of individuation.<sup>138</sup> It is not the solution as such that is pre-individual but rather the potentialities that it contains, the multitude of microphysical forces that are susceptible to be oriented by a singularity in such a manner that they will produce a structure, a form, that is, an individual—in this case the crystal.

In order for the process of individuation to happen there needs to be a certain compatibility between the potential energies in metastable equilibrium and the singularity, the seed, that precipitates the individuation process. Importantly, this is for Simondon the primary meaning of *analogy*, a concept that comes to play a determining role in his system: analogy is a compatibility between the structures of relations latent in the yet amorphous pre-individual state and the actual structure of the seed that precipitates the process of individuation (Simondon [1958] 2013, 85-8). An analogy is an identity between systems of relations (Simondon [1958] 2013, 108), necessary in order for the contact between the seed and the substance to produce the amplifying effect that individuation is (otherwise the encounter between the two would remain without consequences).

Once the crystal is created it exists at its limit, the interior strata are results of an already past activity, and it is at its surface that the crystal continues to grow as long as it is in contact with an analogous structurable substance (Simondon [1958] 2013, 90). The limit of the crystal, the limit where individuation happens, is the point of contact between the individual and its associated milieu. Individuation happens at the point where the individual becomes by solving the problematic which the associated milieu *is*, a point that encompasses the intertwined becoming of the couple

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<sup>138</sup> A *singularity* can be constituted by a foreign particle, or can be inherent to the chemical structure of the super-saturated solution, or otherwise it can remain mysterious, but, for Simondon, it always exists. See (Simondon [1958] 2013, 78-82). The point is that a *seed* (an element of information) is necessary in order to precipitate the individuation.

individual-associated milieu. In the case of physical individuation, the static equilibrium of a stable resolution is reached and the individual is this stable result: the trace of the process of solving the problem that the milieu was, the trace of an individuation always already past. The consequence is that the physical individual, inasmuch as it solves the problematic, also closes it, and as a consequence it appears in duality with its milieu, separated from it, abstracted from it as an answer.<sup>139</sup>

The living being emerges as a further development in the individuation process (Simondon names it *vital individuation*), namely as an enrichment of the problematic, that delays the solution, that prolongs the problem from within (Simondon [1958] 2013, 27-8). Living and non-living are in this view not two different states of being, but different stages of individuation. In the physical individuation the problematic solves itself by producing the individual (the answer) separated from the milieu (the problem), the vital individuation occurs as a postponement, a deferral of the solution for the physical being individuating itself (that is the emergence of time as delay, as postponement, as *différance*). The essential point is that vital individuation is not a problematic of *partes extra partes*, it is not a question of putting together physical individuals in a machinery that is more complex. Rather it is a question of complexifying the process by which the physical individual becomes an individual in the first place, of complexifying the problematic of individuation from within by differing and deferring the solution (the equilibrium). The *living individual* is a problematic continuously solving itself, that jumps from partial solution to partial solution while always keeping an unsolved remainder. Life itself, the fact of being alive, is this tension that incessantly becomes.

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<sup>139</sup> An answer that, strictly speaking, never quite *is*—inasmuch as *being* refers to that intertwined becoming of the individual and the associated milieu, *being* as *becoming* is the moment of tracing the trace (the trace which is not yet a trace).

Another way to put this is that in the living being the associated milieu remains opened as a problem intrinsic to the individual, while remaining at the same time irreducible to the individual. To live is to be in a perpetual process of individuation, to find partial solutions to the problem that the world is, while avoiding the final stable equilibrium that would exhaust the problem and life with it; a final and true answer would separate the living individual from its milieu just as it happens in the case of the physical individual. Thus, for Simondon, the being of the living individual is properly speaking the being of the couple individual-milieu. The distinction between the physical and the living individual is not that of an absolute difference in kind, but ends up resting on the possibility of a deferral, of a postponement of the solution of individuation. One could say that the physical individual is already alive, somewhere at its borders, for that extremely short moment when the world is still a problem, before the answer breaks the individual-milieu couple into two stable domains separated from each other. The associated milieu is not only an exterior milieu, but also an interior one. And a clear-cut distinction does not quite make sense in the end. The associated milieu as an open problem is just another way of saying that the living being carries with (within/without) itself, as an excess, a charge of pre-individual being, an intensive diagrammatic space of potentiality.

Simondon described the being of the associated milieu as a problematic remainder of pre-individual being in the following terms: '[...] le principe d'individuation, au sens strict du terme, est le système complet dans lequel s'opère la genèse de l'individu; [...] de plus, ce système se survit à lui-même dans l'individu vivant, sous la forme d'un milieu associé à l'individu, en lequel continue à s'opérer

l'individuation' (Simondon [1958] 2013, 63).<sup>140</sup> Since the 'entire' system in which individuation happens cannot be but the pre-individual being in the process of being dephased with respect to itself, in my reading, this means that the associated milieu is the pre-individual problematic as it happens with respect to the individual, as it affects the individual. In other words, the associated milieu is the pre-individual as a system of phenomena. This reading twists Simondon's intended meaning, since in many other instances the associated milieu and the pre-individual being appear as two different concepts in his text, at least inasmuch as the *pre-individual being* is (at times) understood as *being* prior to individuation, while the *associated milieu* is part of the *individuated being*, the other half of the individual, its *symbol*.

Simondon traces the meaning of the symbol back to its platonic connotations: a stone broken in two halves in order to attest for a relation of hospitality between two parties, each party keeping one half; the halves function as a *symbols* with respect to one another by virtue of their initial unity that can be reenacted only when the two halves are brought back together (Simondon [1958] 2013, 64). For Simondon, this describes the relation between the individual and the associated milieu. For us, this further means that the associated milieu is the pre-individual as symbol of the individual. Which brings us back to the two incompatible meanings of the pre-individual that were identified earlier.

In the understanding that I propose, the associated milieu and the pre-individual being are two different and contradictory (erroneous) perspectives on the same problem. Inasmuch as the

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<sup>140</sup>[...] the principle of individuation, in the strict sense of the term, is the complete system in which the genesis of the individual takes place [s'opère]; [...] moreover, this system survives itself within the living individual in the form of a milieu associated with the individual, in which the individuation continues to take place [s'opérer]'. [my translation]

diagrammatic space of potentiality that subtends the emergence of the individual is in excess of unity and identity, outside of the temporal and spatial extensions that the individual can grasp (because it constitutes the very conditions through which extension emerges) it can be referred to as pre-individual (erroneously; inasmuch as the pre-individual in this sense is self-contradictory and inherently unthinkable). Inasmuch as the diagrammatic space of potentiality is encountered as phenomena, as intensities in the process of canceling themselves towards qualities and quantities, it appears for the living individual as its associated milieu. And what remains in question, again, is the passage between these two incompatible meanings of the pre-individual—in other words, in this case, the becoming symbol of the pre-individual.

Individuation happens as a becoming of the problematic field that Simondon calls the *pre-individual being*, the living individual is an always partial, always relative result of this becoming, and the very fact of being alive attests for the incompleteness of the solution that the living individual (never quite) is, for the fact that there is a remainder that can carry the individuation further, that can precipitate further partial solutions. This remainder of pre-individuality is the interior/exterior associated milieu as an open intensive problem. The living being is always more-or-less-than-one, and more-or-less-than-identity, by virtue of its charge of pre-individuality, in other words it is always (inasmuch as it is alive) in excess of itself. The individuation does not produce an independent, autonomous individual, but the couple individual-milieu, and a living being never exhausts the pre-individual tension that drives its becoming (inasmuch as it is living). The living being is a prolonged dynamic state of metastable equilibrium, a tension that through its transformations has to preserve itself<sup>(?)</sup>. This problematic develops in a diachronic dimension (the production of time as delay): individuation as a process that goes from the *pre-individual being* to *individuated being* (*being* in the process of individuation), to death when the amplifying connection of individuation fails or when the energies that drive it are exhausted; and it also develops in a

synchronic dimension: individuation as the search for partial solutions to the problematic couple individual-milieu, the being of the individual as the search for partial solutions to the problem that the internal/external milieu is. Thus, the living being is a problem (an intermesh of intensities, of affects) that in solving itself (in collapsing towards identity as a dynamic system individual-associated milieu) keeps itself open as a problem, which is to say a problem that dies—literally—when it finds its complete, final solution, when it finds its identity with itself. A living being lives as long as it manages to maintain the metastable equilibrium of pre-individual potentialities through its becoming; that is, a living being lives as long as it is in excess of itself, as long as it is more-or-less-than-one, in the virtue of its pre-individual load. And because individuation is not simple actualization of a virtual plan, but rather transduction, the direction of becoming is utterly unknown. To be alive is to become towards an unknown other while never quite *being* oneself—since the identity with itself of the individual is always 'à-venir', and when it does come it is death.

### **III.4. Identity as Error**

A thorny problem opens up here. On the one hand the living individual, by its very definition, has to be more-or-less-than-identity, as Simondon insists. On the other hand, in order for an individual to have any kind of reality, be it a relative one, it needs to have some sort of identity. Namely, there needs to be something that would justify the figure of the individual as the gathering together of different phases of the *same* individuation process, of different partial solutions of the *same* process. Wherefrom this sameness? What is it that makes a flow of becoming susceptible to be understood as an individual? What makes a becoming specific? What allows the individual to bear some kind of identity to itself so that it can be (and be understood as) an individual? In the terms proposed in the preceding chapters: what are the parerga that allow the emergence of the embodied individual as a dynamic assemblage of intensities (as a process of individuation)?

Simondon knows very well that it cannot be a question of resemblance to oneself—that would only reintroduce the hylomorphic schema by requiring a self-resemblant form in order to bridge the gap between individuation and the individual. Moreover the identity of the individual as resemblance to oneself would be contradicted by natural phenomena such as metamorphosis, in which there is little resemblance of the individual to itself throughout the different stages of its being. The '=' (the 'is' of 'a is a') cannot appear as a figure of resemblance. The alternative that Simondon proposes is that identity comes not from resemblance to oneself, but from an analogy with respect to oneself (Simondon [1958] 2013, 201). The analogy permits a continuity between different phases of individuation and the possibility of the individual depends on this continuity. As explained above, an analogy supposes a correspondence between systems of relations, a certain identity of relations. In other words, for Simondon, it is possible to understand successive phases in the process of becoming as a *living individual being* (actually as a couple individual-milieu) because there is an analogy between the successive phases of the metastable system of relations. Another way to put it is that the tension in the system (*pre-individual being*) that solves itself in the successive phases—that are strung together as an individual—has to be conserved, the tension has to remain the same while the system is changing. The living individual would thus be a string of partial answers to different variations of the same problem, of the same tension.

Wherefrom the sameness? If the identity of the actual individual is nothing but the becoming of a dynamic system of relations, the identity of the system of relations with respect to itself is, by way of a similar operation, the becoming of the dynamic system of relations that drives the dynamic system of relations that drives the being and becoming of the actual individual (that never quite is). And analogy is the name of this second order identity, of this identity of dynamic relations. Simondon explains this by proposing that there is a center of the problematic of *being* (the problematic of *being* that the dynamic couple individual-associated milieu *is*), and that the

individual exists because the problematic changes at its periphery, but it is stable at its center. It is not a question of spatial centrality, but rather of a structural and functional one (Simondon [1958] 2013, 31, 33-34). The moth that metamorphosises into a butterfly keeps being the same individual because the core of the ontogenetic problematic remains the same, because an analogy with respect to oneself (where the analogy has to be understood as the identity of the functional center of the problematic) is at play, an analogy through which the 'oneself' (the individual) actually emerges.

But, in the framework proposed in this project, the problem of identity with respect to the living individual is not solved: the living individual appears by virtue of analogy with itself, an analogy that describes the identity with itself of the functional center of the problematic, a center that, obviously, presupposes a principle of identity. According to Simondon's own definition and contrary to his stated argument, 'analogy' involves a principle of identity, be it an identity of relations (be it a second order identity, an identity of dynamic relations between dynamic relations that produce actual individuals). The possibility for the living individual to be (to any small extent) anything like an individual rests on the possibility of a principle of identity that would precede it. A principle of identity that would allow analogies and functional centers to operate without collapsing the whole system by negating its necessary premiss (a *pre-individual being* that is more-or-less-than-one and more-or-less-than-identity).

We arrive here, from a different angle at our first problem in this chapter: the aporia of *pre-individual being*. Following the movements sketched when first encountering this problem (namely, the proposition that the problematic of the pre-individual is strictly interlinked with the question of the possibility of thinking the pre-individual), the hypothesis here will be that identity emerges from *pre-individual being* not in a causal chain that starts with the absolute origin of a 'real' before individuation or outside individuation, but from the movements of understanding and recognition



(problems pertinent to the psychic individuation that will be discussed below). In other words, identity, from this perspective, is not inherent in the divergent movements of the intensive fields (the process of individuation as a dynamic of pre-individual relations), but emerges only from recovering the traces of this process—traces that are traces inasmuch as they are uncovered as traces by covering over the difference which they are. That is, identity is a problem of understanding, recognition, thought. The coagulation of identity, as well as the possibility of disturbing it, reside in the lack of origin constituted by the 'pre-' of the pre-individual being as a (miso-sophic) movement of thinking.

That is, identity emerges in covering over (and recovering) the process of individuation (as the becoming of the *pre-individual being*) with its excreted traces—which is to say, by recovering it as individuation in the sense of the becoming of the couple individual-associated milieu. The locus of the question of identity is the passage between two incompatible meanings of individuation (at the same time two incompatible meanings of the pre-individual), and identity appears only as infinitely receding in the gap between the two.

The analogy inherent in the intensive fields of individuation, can be accounted for in terms of the dynamics of the *pre-individual being* only as long as we also take into account the reading that orients and structures this dynamic (order and structure which the individual that performs and is performed by this reading faces as a stringent problem to be solved, as its present, as its environment—its associated milieu). In other words, the problematic of identity pertains to the dynamics of the *pre-individual being* but only inasmuch as it (absurdly) happens as an associated milieu complementary to the (erroneous) individual, and further, the problematic of identity pertains to the cancelation of the affective fields of the (interior/exterior) associated milieu towards a system of representation. Which is to say that the passage between more-or-less-than-identity and identity

remains aporetic and constitutively unexplainable: it can be explained only inasmuch as the individual is always already given as a *principle of identity* that inheres in that which is beyond identity.

I propose that in order to be able to navigate this aporetic space (the problematic of the emergence of identity), inspired by Derrida's theorization of deconstruction, one will have to place oneself within the discourse that they are performing, to acknowledge the *phenomenological plane* upon which this discourse emerges, and to pay attention to its contradictory dynamics—where a phenomenological plane is a contingent virtual structure that conditions (without fully determining) the emergence of phenomena and their subsequent dynamic. That is, one has to acknowledge that thinking *individuation* means operating within phenomenological and epistemological frameworks that, in our case, are inherently interlinked with the (de)construction of a system of representation. Thinking against representation, yes, but from within representation. Thinking against thought. Which is to say, thinking against identity from within a system that always already presupposes a principle of identity (and that always already presupposes the inconsistency with itself of the identical). In order to account for identity one has to account for one's own(?) phenomenological plane (in the sense of a specific way in which the world happens and appears for the individual; a contingent, specific regime of *aisthesis*/sense perception) which harbours the identity that it explains (identity which is in contradiction with itself). In order to account for what identity is, at any of the stages of the process of individuation, one has to account for the principle of identity that subtends one's own(?) thought by playing thought against itself in an opening towards the passion of thinking.<sup>141</sup>

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<sup>141</sup> The next section will come back to the relation between thought and identity as it can be understood from (and against) Simondon's theory.

What (always already) brings the erroneous necessary identity into the process of individuation that produces it is the very *reading* of this process of individuation, or more exactly the phenomenological plane upon which ontogenesis can be *read* (understood) and that is striated by this *reading*. There is no pure outside of identity, at least not for the kind of thinking that we perform/that happens to us/that makes us happen. There is only the (im)possibility of miso-sophically playing identity against itself, the (im)possibility of (de)constructing it. There is no ontogenesis outside of the phenomenological plane upon which it is thought and that infuses it with identity (with identity played against itself). Yet, at the same time, there is no phenomenological plane without its contingent emergence from the ontogenesis that itself subtends.

In ontogenesis identity emerges (actually is (de)constructed) as a *phenomenogenetic* fiction, a phenomenogenetic error always already presupposed in the phenomenological plane that we can (de)construct but that we cannot step outside of. Where *phenomenogenesis* names the contingent dynamic of phenomenological planes, the transformation of the phenomenological plane so that what the associated milieu is and the vectors towards its partial solutions are modified. And because we cannot leave the phenomenological plane behind, at least not in a move that remains consistent with itself, any explanation of the emergence of identity in phenomenogenesis remains in its turn an erroneous fiction, an erroneous fiction erroneously attributed to the movement of ontogenesis.

### **III.5. Ontogenetic and Phenomenogenetic Error**

As already mentioned above, there are two intimately interrelated aspects to the problem of defining an individual: a synchronic and a diachronic one. They map onto what Simondon frames as the definition of the individual with respect to its exteriority and with respect to its interiority. Both of these aspects are rejected by Simondon as false problems (Simondon [1958] 2013, 60-2).

Nonetheless, inasmuch as we accept the erroneous fictionality of the principle of identity this problematic gains a new relevance.

Remaining within the domain of vital individuation, let us start with the synchronic aspect. The individuation is always the individuation of the couple individual-associated milieu, and, as such, there is a need for the specification of a border between the individual and its milieu (no matter how complex or how blurred that border is). The existence of something like an individual depends upon such a border, depends upon some kind of parergon, be it only tentative and temporary. Otherwise the *individuated being* would be something like a universal, undifferentiated substance, and it would make no sense whatsoever to talk about individuation at all. Where does the individual start and end in relation to its milieu? Where is the threshold of the individual in relation to its milieu? An answer is necessary in order to be able to speak about an individual. Nevertheless, while an answer is necessary, all answers are wrong, any answer is an error (a necessary error), there is no absolutely true, correct answer.

What are the limits of the individual that I take myself to be? Where is the limit between myself and the milieu together with which I become? When I say 'I am' the predicate properly refers, in its most basic meaning, to the self and the associated milieu in their intertwined becoming. It is not only the 'I' that *is* but an entire *world*—the couple individual-associated milieu. *Being* properly speaking never refers to the individual, the individual never quite *is*.<sup>142</sup> Yet at the same time, in order for the individual to exist (and it can exist only as an inherent contradiction of *being*), in order for the stone, the rose, the cat, the ~~human~~, the technological object to exist, in order for

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<sup>142</sup> As David Scott puts it in *Gilbert Simondon's 'Psychic and Collective Individuation': A Critical Introduction and Guide*, the individuated being is 'a figment of a process of "form-taking" of the new *in action*' (Scott 2014, 34).

the 'I' to make sense, there needs to be a *caesura* in *being* that would separate the individual from its world, from its associated milieu. In order for the individual to exist it needs some kind of limit, or frame, some kind of body. Even with approximation, where is the limit? What is it? How is it? What are the contours, the parerga, of this body? What are the frames of the kind of body that 'I' am (or have?)? Does this body end with my skin? Is it extended through its prostheses in a McLuhanesque way across the globe?<sup>143</sup> Or is it real only inasmuch as it is part of the 'body' of a community? Is it a shared space of gathering? Is it a corpus? Does this body respond to the first person pronoun? Does it respond to a pronoun at all? Is it just an ill-defined participation in a distributed body with a common digestive system that we call the *internet*?

Any attempted answer is an error. At the very same time, any attempted answer will create around it a fiction, a history of the individual erroneously supposed to exist, and a future for it. The individual is (de)constructed as an ontogenetic error based upon these fictional answers. An ontogenetic error in two ways: 1) inasmuch as it is an (im)possible yet coherent emergence in the ontogenetic flow (by virtue of an erroneous phenomenogenetic *principle of identity*), the emergence of an embodied individual that we never saw coming until it was always already there; 2) inasmuch as, once it comes to be such an erroneous individual (that was always already there, or at least was always already in the making), it necessarily provokes significant changes in how we understand ontogenesis<sup>144</sup>—with new types of embodied individuals the history of ontogenesis fundamentally changes (read: always already was different).

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<sup>143</sup> For McLuhan's theory of media as extensions of the human body see (McLuhan [1964] 1994).

<sup>144</sup> Think for example of Stiegler's understanding of the history and meaning of *being* once we rethink what the <strike>human</strike> *is* with respect to technics. Think too of the possible histories of the body once we assume Judith Butler's theory of performativity or Parikka's media entomology.

The principle of identity as a phenomenogenetic error grounds the (de)construction of the individual as an ontogenetic error. The possibility of an individual hinges on the coherence of the reading that brings forth its limits (on the coherence of the emergence of the parerga that will bring the individual into existence). An individual *is* inasmuch as such a reading makes sense and to the degree that it does so (which is to say: never quite); and it makes sense against the problematic that it has to solve, against the phenomenological plane (which is a specific negotiation of its associated milieu)—which is to say, we will see, the individual only makes sense against the *archives* that it emerges through and from.

The individual, in its embodied materiality, is a necessary and fertile ontogenetic error (that is subtended by a principle of identity, a phenomenogenetic error), a fiction that offers all the thrill and excitement that fictions have to offer on the conditions that: it does not end up being postulated as unquestionable truth (as it happens with the <strike>human</strike> individual); and that it allows for easy flow between different versions of the fiction, between different equivalent errors. Each of these fictions, each of these errors, as true as the other (to the extent that they are coherent within the archives that they emerge through and from), each of them with their exhilarating possibilities and, at the very same time, each of them menacing to be catastrophic. Thus, embodied subjectivity (and thinking embodied subjectivity) as erring, as aimless drifting from error to error. If there is a method to thinking embodiment, that has to be akin to *flânerie*, endless aimless wandering.

The explanation of the individual as a fiction that coagulates around a necessary yet erroneous reading of traces of *becoming* (a necessary yet erroneous reading that itself subtends), folds ontogenesis into phenomenogenesis—the question of the genesis of genesis of phenomena, which is also the question of the genesis of genesis of thought (as and against representation). As we already saw, the problem of thought emerges as a central one in Simondon's project. Because the *pre-*

*individual being* is more-or-less-than-unity and more-or-less-than-identity the question opens: to what extent does thought have access to *pre-individual being* or to individuation before the individual? What makes it possible to know individuation at all? Simondon's answer is (once again): analogy. The becoming of thought is analogous to the becoming of *being*, they enact the same system of relations, and thus individuated being and individuated thought are the results of the same process and manifest the same relational structure (see for ex. Simondon [1958] 2013, 32-6; or 532-3).

This understanding of thought as analogy would imply a relation of truth between thought as an individuation process and *being* as an individuation process. Sure, not in the sense of a transcendental truth as the telos of thought, but as an inherent dimension of thought: inasmuch as thinking is a process of individuation it cannot but think *being* as individuation appropriately, truthfully that is—albeit a truthfulness that is always partial. The critique of the dogmatic image of thought (that was outlined above following in Deleuze's steps), as well as the critique of analogy as (second order) identity, make us suspicious of this parallelism between thinking and being. In order to account for the critique of representation the relation between *thinking* and *being* would have to be outlined by tackling the conjunction of ontogenesis and phenomenogenesis, as commenced above. And the absurd question that imposes itself with increasing intensity is: does thought (or thinking) have an influence on the ontogenetic process? Are epistemological twists ontogenetic?

Simondon forecloses the question and never gives it a chance to really happen. *Psychic individuation*, to which the domain of thought belongs, happens upon an individuated living being, as a further deferral of the individual, a further deferral of the solution to the pre-individual problematic, which means as an intensification of individuation as the process of solving this problematic. But Simondon stipulates: while psychic individuation is multiple, vital individuation is

one (Simondon [1958] 2013, 262), and thus never thematizes the effects of psychic individuation on its living ground. The extent to which *psychic individuation* is intrinsic to vital and physical individuation, as well as the extent to which, consequently, psychic individuation could precipitate the vital and physical individuation into unforeseen directions remains with very few exceptions unquestioned. It is a rather awkward move, in which Simondon saves the 'objective reality' of the world at the expense of collapsing his system by overlooking that the *individuated living being* can never be 'one' and equal with itself (and thus that vital individuation cannot be 'one'), except inasmuch as it is not living (and even then understanding it in terms of identity and oneness is problematic), and that the identity of the physical individual itself is dependent on vital and psychic individuation.

If we accept the idea that vital individuation, by virtue of the pre-individual charge that drives it, can only be more-or-less-than-one, and more-or-less-than identity, the ontogenetic affordances of epistemology appear as a fair possibility. That is, since vital individuation cannot be an already solved problem, and psychic individuation continues vital individuation by means of a further problematization, it is conceivable that psychic individuation has consequences upstream, as it were, in the domains of vital and even physical individuation. That amounts to the question of the relativity of individuation with respect to thought. Simondon's position is that thought grasps only certain aspects of the *individuated being*, these aspects grasped by the subject are indeed relative to its psycho-social conditions, but nonetheless they are aspects of a real process of individuation independent of the subject (Simondon [1958] 2013, 60).

It is significant that the paragraph that states this problematic appears in the original text of Simondon's doctoral thesis, but is excluded from the 1964 edition of *L'Individu et sa Genèse*



*Physico-Biologique*,<sup>145</sup> (and re-included by the editors of the 2005 posthumous complete edition of *L'Individuation à la Lumière des Notions de Forme et d'Information*—who chose to present between square brackets the paragraphs excluded in 1964).<sup>146</sup> The paragraph begins with a surprising statement, profoundly troubling for Simondon's system: 'L'individuation des objets n'est pas entièrement indépendante de l'existence de l'homme; l'objet individué est un objet individué pour l'homme: il y a dans l'homme un besoin d'individualiser les objets qu'est un des aspects du besoin de se reconnaître et de se retrouver dans les choses, et de s'y retrouver comme être ayant une identité définie, stabilisée par un rôle et une activité. L'individuation des objets n'est pas absolue; elle est une expression de l'existence psycho-sociale de l'homme' (Simondon [1958] 2013, 60).<sup>147</sup> Yet Simondon goes on to state that, nonetheless, the individuation of objects is not arbitrary either, what is arbitrary is the aspect of the real individuation that the ~~human~~ being grasps and the supposition that this aspect covers the whole of the reality of individuation. In the 1964 edition, the discussion of this problematic starts directly with the conclusion: the critical and epistemological analysis cannot limit itself to indicating a possible relativity and subjectivity of the principle of individuation (Simondon [1958] 2013, 60).

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<sup>145</sup> See (Simondon [1958] 2013, 60), note 16. *L'Individu et sa Genèse Physico-Biologique*, published in 1964 contains the first part of *L'Individuation à la Lumière des Notions de Forme et d'Information*, Simondon's doctoral thesis (defended in 1958), where the fragment in question appeared.

<sup>146</sup> The fragment is also included between square brackets in the 1995 reedition of *L'Individu et sa Genèse Physico-Biologique*.

<sup>147</sup> 'The individuation of objects is not entirely independent of human existence; the individuated object is individuated object for the human: there is in the human a need to individuate objects, which is one of the aspects of the need to recognize oneself and to rediscover oneself in things, and to rediscover itself as a being who has a definite identity stabilized by a role and an activity. The individuation of objects is not absolute; it is an expression of the human psycho-social existence'. [my translation]

Simondon's argument unfolds along the following lines: asking if an object is indeed what it appears to be for us, means trying to characterize the individual in itself or with respect to other realities, which makes it the term of a relation (Simondon [1958] 2013, 62); it also means searching for a principle that would make the individual what it is with respect to its interiority (why it is what it is) and with respect to its exteriority (why is it different from others) (Simondon [1958] 2013, 60-1). Or, the whole conceptualization of individuation, Simondon insists, is there to prove that these directions of inquiry are wrong. There cannot be a question of interiority and exteriority, since the individual is the reality of an energetic field (i.e. a pre-individual problematic) which produces both interiority and exteriority (Simondon [1958] 2013, 62); the only principle of individuation, maintains Simondon, is the process of individuation in its entirety, thus the individual is, so to speak, the being of its own individuation; and, accordingly, the individual is not the term of a relation neither with itself, nor to the other, but the being of relation itself (Simondon [1958] 2013, 62-3). Thus, Simondon rejects the question of the relativity of individuation with respect to the thinking subject.

But this argument holds only if the initial formulation of the problem is deleted, as happened in the 1964 edition. Yes, the individual is the being of relation, it is being in the process of individuation, and as such the questions of identity to itself, and difference from others do not make sense. But talking about objects, about crystals, stones, roses, corals, ~~human~~ beings, technological objects or art(?)works (of the 'objet individué pour l'homme') does bring the problematic of identity and difference to the fore. The *being* in the process of individuation, as Simondon presents it, is *being* without a name, *being* that cannot be grasped, exactly because it refuses any identity, any definition. On the other hand, objects as appear for the subject are figures delimited against a ground of otherness—*individuated beings*—, that is to say they need both a principle of identity and a principle of difference, they have a definition, and only as such can bear

the weight of a name, of a signifier. Simondon's explanation, while true to the conceptualization of individuation does not bridge the gap between individuation and individuals, between individuation and objects. Or, alternatively, if we do accept the displacement of the meaning of the individual to something that is prior to exteriority and interiority (the meaning in which Deleuze will use the concept too), then the problem is on the one hand the gap between individuals and objects as they appear in the system of representation through recognition, and on the other hand the fact that this meaning does not remain stable in Simondon's system (the fact that the individual is at times this being of individuation prior to the possibility of a definition, or of a contour, and at other times a well defined object or living being).

Of course, we are facing yet again the problem of the aporetic emergence of identity, and Simondon's solution, which rests on the analogy between thinking and *being*, does not quite hold in our framework. Let us remember the basic argument formulated so far, before tackling this problem one step further: the being of the individual in this system can only be that of a necessary error, grounded in a (mis)reading; the individual *is* (never quite *is*) and becomes only upon the ground of the phenomenogenetic error that is the principle of identity inherent in our phenomenological plane—in the phenomenological plane that we can (de)construct from inside but that we cannot step outside of. The problem that we are facing (how to get from individuation to individuals consistent with themselves as they appear in the system of representation?) changes from this perspective to: what is the relation between the ontogenetic error (the individual) and the phenomenogenetic error (the principle of identity)? How do they feed into each other?

'La subjectivité de l'individuation pour l'homme, la tendance à individuer les objets ne doivent pas faire conclure que l'individuation n'existe pas et ne correspond à rien'<sup>148</sup> (Simondon [1958] 2013, 60), says Simondon without saying it, towards the end of the deleted paragraph. Yes, the individuation exists and corresponds to something, but not to a firm, absolute, underlying reality—as Simondon would have wanted it—, rather to the fiction or error of misreading in the traces of becoming an *individuated being*. An error that from the ontogenetic perspective would start somewhere at a threshold within vital individuation (when individuals start coagulating upon the phenomenological plane), and that would continue and take a new meaning with psychic individuation; yet an error which acts as the seed (the singularity) that allows individuated being and its individuation to be and to be known.

An attempt to describe phenomenogenesis from an ontogenetic perspective<sup>149</sup> would probably unfold along the following lines:

A crystal is not an individual for itself, it is indeed nothing for itself, it is (and it is an individual) only for other individuals (vital and psychic individuals). Simple life forms, likewise, are not individuals for themselves, neither are there any individuals contoured in their respective associated milieux, but unlike the case of the crystal, there is now an associated milieu as a flux of energy that needs to be continuously negotiated. Further down in the process proto-forms start to emerge as patterns in the flux of the pre-individual problematic as experienced (*aistesis*/sense perception) by (not quite) individuals. That is, 'things', individuals, start to be framed against the background of the associated milieu, but the contours are still fluid and unstable. What would become one's own<sup>(?)</sup>

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<sup>148</sup> 'The subjectivity of individuation for the human, the tendency to individuate the objects, should not lead to the conclusion that individuation does not exist and does not correspond to anything'. [my translation]

<sup>149</sup> This is the exercise that Jakob von Uexküll was engaged in (Uexküll [1934, 1940] 2010).

body is still not thematized at this stage, but it is there in negative, implicitly, as the need and the desire to which the proto-forms in the associated milieu respond, and it will be progressively contoured in negative until when, much later (almost never), it will be posited explicitly as a problem in the world and will further precipitate the problematic of psychic individuation. And it is somewhere here (in the aftermath of something like a 'mirror stage') that a principle of identity starts to make sense, the '=' of 'a = a'.

Yet, obviously, any such explanation of the emergence of a principle of identity—of the emergence of a phenomenological plane governed by a tendency towards (and against) identity—is nothing but an erroneous fiction. We cannot place ourselves outside of the phenomenological plane on which we are operating, and thus we cannot account for its emergence, except by doing it in terms that are inherent in the phenomenological plane that they should explain. In ontogenesis identity is a phenomenogenetic error. In phenomenogenesis the emergence of identity cannot be accounted for except as an erroneous ontogenetic fiction—and, more generally, the 'genesis' part of phenomenogenesis cannot be but an erroneous fiction. And the end point that orients this ontogenetic fiction is the individual. The individual is an error that, to the extent that it makes sense, in coming into existence creates its own history, its own ontogenesis, including the becoming of the (often unacknowledged) ground of the phenomenological plane upon which this ontogenesis emerges and makes sense. That is, the individual grounds the emergence of identity as an underlying thread of the phenomenological plane. The principle of identity is a phenomenogenetic error grounded in the fictional history that the individual affords—a phenomenogenetic error erroneously grounded in the ontogenesis of the individual (as ontogenetic error) that it, in its turn, grounds.

To conclude this section, let us note that we started with the synchronic aspect of the problematic of the relativity of the individual (the problem of defining the individual with respect to its exteriority;

how come the individual is separated from its milieu?) and, at the expense of jumping an unbridgeable gap, we reached (once again) the diachronic one (what Simondon frames as the problem of defining the individual with respect to its interiority; how come an identity emerges from the pre-individual problematic?). On the way, we saw why Simondon's dismissal of this problematic ends up leaving unexplainable the gap between individuation and individuals, or that between individuals and objects as they appear in the system of representation (depending on which understanding of the individual one wants to adopt). In proposing the conjunction between ontogenetic and phenomenogenetic error as a way of navigating the inherent tensions of the theory of individuation this text maintains on the one hand that that identity is not an absolute transcendental truth, but emerges in ontogenesis and is grounded in the ontogenetic emergence of the individual (with its successive stages), and, on the other hand that, at the same time, this process of emergence of identity (and of the individual) is nothing but an (erroneous) explanation formulated from a perspective in which identity is always already inherent.<sup>150</sup>

The next chapter focuses on the structures that perform the folding of phenomenogenesis into ontogenesis. This will be formulated as the problematic of the *archive*, where archives are understood as actual structures that allow a process of ontogenesis to happen, and, we will see, are always already informed by the phenomenological plane. The chapter first proposes an understanding of archives in the framework provided by the theory of individuation, in order to foreground the relevance of this topic for discussing the conjunction of phenomenogenesis and

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<sup>150</sup> We should note here that the understanding of the Other changes significantly in this context. The singularity of embodied experience, which is a specific negotiation of a singular phenomenological plane, subtends the entirety of ontogenesis. The Other in this sense is not of the order of another embodied experience in the world, but literally constitutes another world, another process of individuation, another phenomenological plane, whose dynamics are integral to the individuation of 'I myself' and of my world, but that nonetheless remains essentially other.

ontogenesis. Subsequently, following two examples pertinent to net art<sup>(?)</sup> specta(c)torship, the text errs in the space opened up by the problematic of anarchival events that destabilize and reorient the archive. Which will bring us, once again, to a moment where the diverse vectors that emerge in the process of specta(c)torship will have to be addressed in a more structured way in the framework based on the theory of individuation, this time as the problematic of psychic individuation and its recursive folding upon itself (in *Chapter V*).

## Chapter IV: (An)Archives and Individuation

In the previous chapter, I argued that identity emerges in ontogenesis (actually is (de)constructed) only as a phenomenogenetic fiction, a phenomenogenetic error, always already presupposed in our phenomenological plane. Thus, the problematic of individuation appears from a new perspective, significantly different from the one proposed by Simondon. If the chasm between individuation and individuals is to be bridged, one has to account for the emergence of identity as phenomenogenetic error, an error relative to the kind of individuals that we ourselves<sup>(?)</sup> (never quite) are (individuals that are nothing but an ontogenetic error). Asking the question of individuation, the question of the becoming of the individual, while accounting for the necessarily erroneous phenomenological plane, means interrogating ontogenesis as an erroneous history writing itself as *being* in its *becoming*.

In this context, I will sketch an understanding of archives as structures that ground the folding of the phenomenological plane into ontogenesis—and hence suggest that an examination of the problematic of the archive is strictly necessary in order to account for the emergence of identity and individuals. I propose that anarchival events disorient and restructure all archives, sometimes resulting in entire new domains of individuation. The chapter considers Eduardo Kac's work *Genesis* (1999), and the seminal net art<sup>(?)</sup> archive [runme.org](http://runme.org) (2003 - ongoing) in an attempt to explore, in a process of net art<sup>(?)</sup> specta(c)torship, this conjunction of ontogenetic and phenomenogenetic errors that subtend the intertwined emergence of identity and of the embodied thinking individual.



#### **IV.1. (An)Archives and Singularities**

For Simondon, in order for the forces that comprise the metastable pre-individual fields to be precipitated into the dynamic of individuation there needs to be a singularity that puts into contact (mediates between) different levels of magnitude, between different orders of pre-individual reality (Simondon [1958] 2013, 78-82). It is only through the action of singularities that individuals can emerge. Singularities should be understood in this context as specific structures, actual individuals (physical, vital, psychic, etc.), with the property that they can precipitate around them a process of individuation—in other words, with the property that they define, with respect to a given environment, a diagrammatic space of potentiality. Simondon insists for the necessity of a singularity in the process of individuation. The material and energetic conditions of a system are not enough to provoke individuation, what is missing is an element of information,<sup>151</sup> generally not immanent (Simondon [1958] 2013, 79)—the singularity. Even if there are cases where singularities might be impossible to distinguish, nonetheless, for Simondon, they must exist (Simondon [1958] 2013, 81).<sup>152</sup>

This chapter will be concerned with singularities that potentially disorient and reorient the process of individuation (provoking new patterns of individuation), or (strictly related) with singularities that afford crossing a threshold in the process of individuation (from physical to vital, from vital to psychic, or the other way around, from psychic to physical or vital and so on). Think of nucleic acids (DNA and RNA) (singularities that exist as physical individuals) that, under specific conditions, afford at the level of physical individuation the emergence of vital individuation; think of neurons (living individuals) that assembled in complex systems afford at the level of vital

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<sup>151</sup> For a discussion of information see below.

<sup>152</sup> One of Simondon's favorite examples of singularities is the seed that initiate the process of crystallization.

individuation the emergence of psychic individuation. Of course, this is already an oversimplification. In order to be able to account for the emergence of psychic individuation, one also has to add technological individuals, and the transindividual collective as such systems of singularities. And, similarly, the passage between physical and vital individuation cannot be explained by the dynamics of the genetic code (at the very least one has to take into account the production of a cell membrane, the emergence of metabolism, but also the relationship between living cells and their environment). Thus, more accurately, the passage between different levels of individuation happens at the intersection of multiple systems of singularities. Yet, even putting the problem in this way, we are still oversimplifying and misrepresenting it. Individuation is not a problematic of *partes extra partes*, adding together chemical 'building blocks' does not result in a genetic code, adding together neurons, does not result in a nervous system capable of thought and thinking. Rather individuation is a question of a dynamic relational field, of which the 'building blocks' are the results or the traces. Which is to say, individuation is a dynamic problematic sustained and shaped by actual individuals, but not created *ex nihilo* by actual individuals.

In a way, these singularities are minimum traces left by an individuation process at levels below those that it comes to attain, traces that allow the process to reoccur, different, yet the same, following in its own footsteps—(never) the same river twice. Yet, the trace emerges as a trace only if it is followed (if it acts as mediation), if it is recursively re-covered in that which it points towards. A singularity can be a singularity only as re-covered by the individuals that it produces (the chemical 'building blocks' constitute a genetic code only inasmuch as they afford vital individuation, inasmuch as they account for the (im)possibility of the living individual; the neurons are neurons and constitute a nervous system only inasmuch as they afford psychic individuation—well before any 'human' body, of course). In this sense, singularities are the (quasi)objects of a dynamic archive (accumulation of traces) which is the necessary propeller of individuation. From

the perspective of the level of individuation at which they exist singularities are individuals, from the perspective of the levels whose traces they are, and that can be reached by following their impulses, singularities are vectors of individuation.

The genetic code is such a system of singularities somewhere at the border between physical and vital individuation. The networks of neurons of the nervous system are such systems of singularities at the border between vital and psychic individuation. 'Cultural' archives (both in the sense of systems of knowledge—a mathematical paradigm, the laws of physics, a way of writing history, etc —, and in the sense of gathering together of 'cultural' traces—museums, collections of historical documents, collections of art(?)works etc.) are systems of singularities somewhere at the borders of psychic individuation.

I propose to think of such systems of traces that afford a potential process of individuation as archives—i.e. we extend the concept of archive to refer to any such system of singularities. Not every accumulation of traces is an archive, systems of traces are archives inasmuch as they afford a process of individuation (archives are archives by virtue of the future that they open up). Yet, one step further, the problematic of the archive is at the same time that of singularities as traces that recursively orient becoming, and that of singularities that dis-orient and re-orient, of anomalies, absurdities, uncanny occurrences, errors—singularities on the point of emerging as singularities by throwing individuation into unknown (and unknowable) directions, singularities as the vectors of

the new.<sup>153</sup> In such cases, we are dealing with what we could call *anarchival* events, events which hold the potentiality of restructuring the archive, or of opening a new archival level.

I am borrowing the concept of anarchive, as discussed by Erin Manning with respect to the practice of SenseLab (Manning 2020, 75-80), in order to point towards events that subvert the archive, and yet that potentially leave archival traces able to carry them forward. While Manning writes about the anarchive primarily as embodied 'cultural' practice, in the sense I propose here the concept extends to all levels of individuation. Anarchival events, produced by anomalous, absurd singularities, are instances of disorienting and reorienting the archive, sometimes with the effect of taking individuation beyond a threshold (always ill-defined)<sup>154</sup> and producing entire new levels of individuation (from physical individuation to vital individuation, etc.). One major difference between Manning's theory and the framework proposed here can be most succinctly formulated by referencing Deleuze thinking of the virtual. Manning writes: "The virtual is real, as Deleuze reminds us, but not actual. Our work, as regards the anarchive, was to devise techniques that could make the unrealized as real felt" (Manning 2020, 80). In our case, anarchival events are also responsible for generating new virtualities, and for (dis)orienting the virtual plane, not only for making it felt. The aberrations of vital individuation that result in individuals conscious of themselves (even if this consciousness turns out to be nothing but an error—and how could it be anything but an error?), aberrations that are the results of a long series of anarchival events, also produce new virtual potentialities and dis/re/orient the existing ones. (With the caveat that the entire

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<sup>153</sup> The 'new' as defined in (Deleuze [1968] 1993, 177): the new is that which provokes in thought a movement that cannot be arrested in recognition and representation. Which is to say, more generally, that which throws the individual into its unknowable becoming (at any stage of individuation, not only at the level of thought and thinking).

<sup>154</sup> Such thresholds are never stable givens, but rather depend on the perspective that one adopts and on scale.

history of this production is dependent upon the very virtual plane generated and (dis)oriented in the process).

If such moments in which new domains of individuation are created are relatively rare, nonetheless anarchival events as (dis)orientation of individuation are rather common. At the level of vital individuation, the whole evolution of life is the outcome of such absurd, anomalous occurrences that push becoming into the unknown. At the level of the embodied thinking subject, following in the process of miso-sophic thinking the anomalous singularities of psychic individuation (the instances where the phenomenological plane is disturbed) against its own traces (against the usual dynamic of the phenomenological plane) is such a process that affords the non-teleological errors of phenomenogenesis.

Individuation is dependent on dynamic archives of singularities and on the anarchival events that happen in them, on the (im)possible links and paths inside the archives, and on their generative potentialities. That is to say, individuation does not happen in a void, but in an actuality that recursively conditions the diagrammatic space of potentiality. And this actuality, I argue, is that of an embodied thinking subject in relation to its environment—the fact that the embodied thinking subject is nothing but an erroneous product of individuation does not deny its role in the actuality that recursively conditions the space of potentiality that grounds individuation. Simondon's insistence for the necessity of singularities translates in our framework, not as the necessity of singularities as 'real' physical structures, but as the necessary (if erroneous) folding of the

phenomenogenetic error (the principle of identity) into the history of its emergence (in 'real' physical structures such as those that Simondon tries to identify).<sup>155</sup>

The phenomenological plane (and epistemological framework) is the locus of the principle of identity that structures ontogenesis from the very beginning (from the beginning as the lack of origin). At the same time, 'cultural' archives (that cannot be separated from technology and politics) striate the phenomenological plane and, in doing so, define the structure of the framework in which we can think ontogenesis (the theory of individuation is nothing but linguistic formulas based on specific situated knowledges, specific technological and political affordances etc.). The absurd thought that we will try to follow is that, as a consequence, mutations in contemporary archival practices are inherently ontogenetic inasmuch as they provoke mutations on the phenomenological plane that grounds ontogenesis (thus, inasmuch as they are phenomenogenetic)—this folding of the 'cultural' archive (as a diagrammatic space of potentiality that striates the phenomenological plane) into the very core of ontogenesis can be followed at all the thresholds of the ontogenetic process (genetic code as archive; nervous system as archive etc.).

Let us turn once again to particular processes of net art(?) specta(c)torship in order to get tangled in the intricacies of this problematic.

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<sup>155</sup> The difference is that Simondon needs singularities in order to prevent the existence of a principle of identity in the pre-individual domain. On the other hand, this text has already formulated a hypothesis concerning the immanence of identity in ontogenesis as phenomenogenetic error.

## IV.2. *Genesis*

The concept of 'archive', according to Derrida, incorporates a principle of *commencement* (a historical, natural and ontological origin) and a principle of *commandment* (Derrida 1996, 1-2).<sup>156</sup>

My argument is, that inasmuch as it does so, the functioning of the archive bears on the very origins that it creates inasmuch as it uncovers, and uncovers inasmuch as it creates—an uncovering, a revealing, that is always a concealment. In other words, the archive performs its origin, an origin that reflects and grounds the power relations inherent in the structure of the archive. Which is to say, the archive has an ontogenetic function.

So... here we are once again, where we never were in the first place, face to face with the enthralling absurdity (dis-harmony) of a living system composed of bio-engineered bacteria: *Genesis*. Or rather, face to face with a history of *Genesis*, face to face with its online documentation.

Exhibited for the first time in 1999 at *Ars Electronica*, *Genesis* is a work by Eduardo Kac that 'explores the intricate relationship between biology, belief systems, information technology,

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<sup>156</sup> For a discussion of Derrida's theory of the archive see below. Derrida's framework is relevant for our discussion inasmuch as it theorizes the folding of the principle of commandment in the ontological (I would say rather 'ontogenetic') origin.

dialogical interaction, ethics and the Internet' (Kac 1999).<sup>157</sup> The central piece consists of a Petri dish with two kinds of genetically modified bacteria, one of them incorporating a synthetic gene that was created by translating a sentence from the biblical book of Genesis ('Let man have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moves upon earth') into Morse Code, and subsequently converting the resulting Morse Code sequence into DNA base pairs (Kac 1999). Mutations occur in the synthetic gene as the result of natural bacterial multiplication processes, interactions between the two different kinds of bacteria, and human-activated UV radiation (Kac 1999). The main exhibit is completed by a flexible microvideo camera, a UV light box, and a microscope illuminator that connect to a video projector and two networked computers. The video projector shows live, in the gallery, a magnified image of the bacterial division and interaction as seen through the microvideo camera. One of the computers streams live video and audio on the web, and allows the online spectators to control the UV light turning it on or off (the impact of the UV light on the bacteria is accelerating the mutation rate),

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<sup>157</sup> The work, the context of its exhibition, and the curatorial texts surrounding it, firmly place *Genesis* as a disturbing form of net art<sup>(?)</sup>—see also David Hunt's text for the gallery brochure of *Genesis* exhibition at Julia Friedman Gallery who likens the process of specta(c)torship that *Genesis* affords with the experience of reading a hypertext novel (Hunt 2001). The work is also addressed by Roberto Simanowski in *Digital Art and Meaning* with respect to the authorial function of the collaboration between the genetically modified bacteria and the online spectators (Simanowski 2011, 54-7), and by Jennifer Chan with respect to its position in a history of the appropriation of net art<sup>(?)</sup> by the institutional art-world and the art market: 'Eduardo Kac's *Genesis* is an early example of institutionalized Net art that was made saleable' (Chan 2019, 117).

Concerning this last point, while acknowledging the importance of the anti-institutional trends of (some) net art<sup>(?)</sup> and the legitimacy of the concern regarding the tensile relation between net art<sup>(?)</sup>, art institutions and the art market, nonetheless I maintain that this does not disqualify this work from being addressed in our context. The process of specta(c)torship that the online documentation of *Genesis* affords offers important insights into the ontogenetic and phenomenogenetic problematic of net art<sup>(?)</sup> specta(c)torship.

The online documentation of *Genesis* can be accessed at: <http://www.ekac.org/geninfo.html>, accessed 6.03.2018.



while the other one generates live music based on the DNA sequences of the bacteria, using an algorithm designed by Peter Gena in collaboration with Dr. Charles Strom.<sup>158</sup> At the end of the show the DNA sequence of the synthetic gene is decoded and translated back to plain English revealing the mutations that the text has suffered: 'LET AAN HAVE DOMINION OVER THE FISH OF THE SEA AND OVER THE FOWLOF THE AIR AND OVER EVERY LIVING THING THAT IOVES UA EON THE EARTH' (Kac 1999).<sup>159</sup>

According to the description of the work on Kac's website, the specific biblical fragment was chosen 'for its implications regarding the dubious notion of (divinely sanctioned) humanity's supremacy over nature' (Kac 1999). Thus, *Genesis* invites us to rethink the relationship between 'human' and 'nature', between 'culture' (history) and 'physis', folding them into one another and challenging the tradition that draws a clear distinction between them. 'Nature' and 'culture' appear in this work rather like the continuous face of a Moebius strip, generating the illusion of a recto and a verso.<sup>160</sup>

The 'cultural' archive is expressed in *Genesis* at the most basic level of vital individuation, as a sequence of genes that condition (to some extent) the individuation of living individuals. And, in the ontogenetic account, living individuals are, of course, the basis of the process of psychic individuation that will leave the traces re-covered by the 'cultural' archive. The 'cultural' archive literally performs and modifies its pre-history, it is folded into the origin of vital individuation that

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<sup>158</sup> For information on the algorithm and audio samples see: <http://www.ekac.org/dnamusic.html>, accessed 6.03.2018.

<sup>159</sup> For the steps of the translation of the mutated gene to English: <http://www.ekac.org/translated.html>, accessed 16.03.2021.

<sup>160</sup> For a detailed look at the relationship between 'culture' and 'Nature' in *Genesis* and its implications for embodied subjectivity, which complements the discussion here, see (Băcăran 2023).

makes psychic individuation possible. There is a world of difference between bacteria and the animals that we (never quite) are but, as living beings, we share the basic reliance on the workings of the genetic code (even if the genetic code does not fully predefine neither bacteria not ~~humans~~). As such, the work is not only about modifying the Other, but also about modifying ourselves<sup>(?)</sup>: “LET AAN HAVE DOMINION...”, about intervening in the pre-history of living beings. And the very possibility of this brutal short-circuit (between the abstract yet immediate 'cultural' archive and the immediate yet abstract genetic code), brings into question contemporary bio-technological practices by playfully deploying them, but also, more than that, it reveals (in covering) the primordial ('primordial' as lacking an origin) conjunction between the 'cultural' archive and the grounds of vital individuation that makes such practices possible in the first place.

The process of specta(c)torship in *Genesis* tempts us to (mis)understand the history of life as the history of successive forms of archiving: one of the most immediate of them (while always already infinitely mediated) is the collective 'cultural' archive of a community (the biblical fragment and its anthropocentric vectors, an always already political and technological archive); one of the most abstract (although always already infinitely immediate) is the genetic code of our cells. The genetic code makes sense only against the background of an immense archive of knowledge. It is a problematic that opens at a very abstract level of scientific research, proposing itself as an immediate immanent truth of life. While accepting it as an immediate truth, as biology proposes, it is important to remember the infinite thickness of its mediation.<sup>161</sup> The more immediate it is, the more abstract—immediate only because it is infinitely mediated. The genetic code makes sense

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<sup>161</sup> To make a connection with the consideration of the 'archē' below, one could turn to Bernard Stiegler's understanding of Derridean *différance* (the 'archē' of the archi-trace but also of the archive) qua the history of life in general (Stiegler 1998, 141).

only against the background of a rich tradition of knowledge, and it inherits the directions, limits and struggles of these larger archives that it builds upon. Proposing it as an immediate truth, forgetting the phenomenological and epistemic thickness of the context it emerges from, means replacing scientific discourse with dogma, the process of thinking with the pretended atemporal revelation, the dynamic structure of interrelated hypotheses with the monolithic absolute truth. On the other hand, forgetting its immediacy blinded by the thickness of mediated discourse, is again a fallacy. It misses the extent to which this very discourse is dependent on the immediacy of the processes that inform the being and becoming of living individuals. In other words, genes are 'really' there, immediately there, but the scientific discourse formulated in a specific epistemic context and upon a specific phenomenological plane is inherent to what genes are. Genes are really there as an explanation of the dynamics of an intensive field, an explanation that will unavoidably be modified as the epistemological framework and the phenomenological plane that subtend it changes. Which does not mean that any explanatory discourse is possible, but only that there is always a potential alternative discourse, that no discourse is the ultimate stable truth.

It would likewise be a mistake to think that there is a stable truth beyond epistemic frameworks and discourse, a truth of intensive dynamics that remains independent of its actual misrepresentations. The phenomenological plane and the epistemological framework that ground any explanation (scientific, philosophical or otherwise) are integral to the 'real' intensive process that produces life (as an originary lack of origin), and not only to its actualizations in ~~human~~ thought. To deny this is to fall into the anthropocentric presupposition that our phenomenological planes (the ways in which phenomena emerge for us), as currently extended and (de)constructed by science and technology, open towards an ultimate stable truth (be it attainable or not), or worse, to maintain that scientific or philosophical knowledge is independent of our situated phenomenological planes with their complex dynamics and politics. At the most basic ontogenetic

level, the errings of phenomenogenesis are susceptible to modify the very dynamics of the intensive fields, to modify what comes to be intensive. *Affects* understood as intensities, inasmuch as, ontogenetically speaking, they differ between different forms of life, attest to the phenomenogenetic emergence of heterogeneous (if interrelated) fields of intensities—a consequence of anarchical events upon the archival systems that support life. It is the merit of Jakob von Uexküll to have explored the diversity of worlds (phenomenological planes) of 'animals and humans' and to start unraveling the consequences of these differences for our understanding of the living individual (Uexküll [1934, 1940] 2010). The ways in which phenomena happen for us and the convoluted history of changes in our phenomenological planes (phenomenogenesis) are integral to what genes are, just as epistemological frameworks are. Scientific theories, in all their generality and with all the empirical confirmations, are grounded upon specific phenomenological planes (experiments in science are mechanisms of confirming this grounding and, at times, extend the phenomenological plane in the very attempt of doing so), and no phenomenological plane is absolute.

This does not mean though that there is no truth to scientific (or philosophical) explanations, or that scientific (or philosophical) truths cannot go beyond the figure of the ~~human~~. The phenomenological plane is ontogenetically structured and modified in the *intimacy of the common*, being a result of the complex intertwining of multiple processes of individuation with respect to one-another. The intimacy of the common refers to all other processes of individuation (physical, vital, psychic, technological etc.) that are part of (and at the same time shape from its outside) the

associated milieu, and as such it constitutes the political dimension of any archive.<sup>162</sup> Yet, the phenomenological plane remains situated, singular and uncommunicable, even if shaped in the intimacy of the common (there is no universal, objective, phenomenological plane and neither a phenomenological plane common to a species, a group or a community—although phenomenological planes can be very similar, and striated by common archives). Just as the ~~human~~ body is the result of a long contingent evolution and of the ongoing negotiations with its environment and the other individuals populating that environment, so the phenomenological plane, including its technological and scientific variations and extensions is the result of a contingent evolution and of ongoing negotiation, and is never absolute. Everything thought and demonstrated upon this plane will be likewise a contingent product—a theory can be true, to the extent that it accounts for a bigger or smaller array of phenomena that happen upon a given phenomenological plane, but always relatively so.<sup>163</sup> The phenomenological plane is not ~~human~~, i.e. the 'I' of the 'I think' strictly speaking means a whole world, the couple individual-associated milieu in its dynamic becoming, and not the individuated embodied subject; yet the 'I' names the world only inasmuch as the world misrecognizes itself<sup>(?)</sup> in the figure of the embodied subject.

The 'cultural' archives are structures that striate the phenomenological plane at the level of psychic and collective individuation, organize it and modify it, at times playing it against itself, but do not

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<sup>162</sup> I am borrowing the term *intimacy of the common* from Muriel Combes who uses it to refer to Simondon's contention that the collective is born at the same time that emotions are structured for the embodied subject, and in fact across subjects (Combes 2013, 51-5). I extend the concept to mean the collective dynamic that leads to the construction of any phenomenological plane. Yet, differing from Simondon and Combes, I understand the phenomenological plane as being strictly singular. In other words, individuals and their worlds remain singular events even if emerging only as shaped in the intimacy of the common.

<sup>163</sup> A proposition that resonates with Yuk Hui's thinking of *cosmotechnics*, that I discuss below in *Chapter V*.

create the phenomenological plane *ex nihilo*. Thus a certain consistency in terms of the intensive dynamics inherent on the phenomenological plane and their actualization (think time and space for example, or the principle of identity). Yet inasmuch as this ontogenetic account of the structuring of the phenomenological plane is always already subtended by the phenomenological plane that it explains, these levels of consistency do not constitute hard limits that cannot be trespassed in the errings of phenomenogenesis, but rather thresholds within the phenomenogenetic dynamic. The problem is further complicated by the fact that the phenomenological plane is given for the individual as a structure that lacks ontogenetic thickness, that is ontogenetically flat (superficial, one could say)—a specific way in which phenomena happen, a phenomenological plane (the background of any further sense/perception and understanding) is always already there and has no future (it can be striated, folded and played against itself, but is always already there as the background for this striation; the phenomenological plane can be disturbed, and phenomenogenesis names its erring towards the unknown, yet this erring is not experienced and cannot be explained, each 'point' on the trajectory of this erring is given for the individual as an event that is atemporal with respect to the chronological understanding of time). The thickness of the ontogenetic dynamic (chronological thickness of chains of causality) always remains flat, superficial, atemporal, inasmuch as it develops upon the continuous present generated by the phenomenological plane; it always remains merely embodied sensation and theoretic discourse that striates the infinite superficiality of the phenomenological plane. While at the same time the phenomenological plane is nothing but a thickness, a depth added to the ontogenetic dynamic. Thus the impossibility of anticipating 'how much' of the ontogenetic dynamic is affected by the striations and the disturbances (anarchival events) of the phenomenological plane: 'the everything', *being* (in both its ontic and ontological understanding), is continuously at stake.

'Let man have dominion...'. Following the gesture of inscribing a 'cultural' fragment, the commandment and the law that inheres in it (the biblical fragment, sign of a guilty history that propels us into environmental catastrophe), in the very origin of vital individuation puts the problematic of life in a certain absurd perspective. (I would invite you to listen to the algorithmically generated disharmonious sounds that were part of *Genesis* as a way of further immersing yourself in this absurdity). The absurdity consists in the fact that the Nature/'culture' duality is folded against itself, that Nature in its immediacy as an ontogenetic process is always already subtended by the 'cultural' archives that striate the phenomenological plane (archives that are nothing but part of the thickness of the ontogenesis, of Nature). Life is immediate but can appear only as a function in the meta-dimension of the 'cultural' archive that itself subtends, erring in (and against) the archive has ontogenetic consequences. Our understanding of the functioning of the genetic code that subtends life is integral to what life is and influences what life becomes. Our (mis)understanding of the world (the cancelation of the intensive world in 'Nature') shapes what the world is and what it becomes.<sup>164</sup> Which is not to say that the world is at our discretion, but that it is not independent of our (mis)understanding. It is also not to say that any (mis)understanding is possible or is as good as any other. 'Nature' is what it is, but our phenomenological planes and our understanding is part of what 'Nature' is, and with anarchival events that (dis)orient our understanding 'Nature' itself becomes towards an unknowable otherness.<sup>165</sup>

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<sup>164</sup> 'Our' will have to be understood as referring to the *intimacy of the common*, to a being together through which we become who we (never quite) are, a being together that will have to go beyond the ~~human~~ community.

<sup>165</sup> Which underlines the unforgivable fallacy of having confused a multiplicity of intensive worlds (~~human~~ and otherwise) with one 'Nature', with one set of absolute truths/laws, and of having reduced intensive worlds to resources to be exploited and to an undistinguished otherness to be conquered and assimilated.

There is no underlying reality composed of individuals and the relations between them that one could access beyond mediation, no 'Nature' prior to the 'culture' which envisages it (and of course, no 'culture' without the 'Nature' that subtends the very physical, vital, psychic backgrounds upon which it happens). From a phenomenogenetic angle, 'Nature' is a specific coagulation of phenomena and the perspective from which these phenomena can be perceived, understood, known (a 'cultural' paradigm, a phenomenological plane and the epistemological frameworks that it grounds), is integral to what 'Nature' is—even if 'Nature', from an ontogenetic perspective, is the ground that subtends the emergence of any phenomenon. *Genesis* brings this conjunction of *phenomenogenesis* and *ontogenesis* into focus through the interplay of a 'cultural' archive (the biblical fragment) and the genetic code (a physical archive that subtends vital individuation).

#### **IV.3. (Still) Genesis: (An)Archives and Information**

At the same time, the problematic of archives, and thus the problematic of the folding of phenomenogenesis into ontogenesis, is the problematic of *information*.

Why? Because information, following Simondon, is the tension between two systems, the tension that accounts for the potentiality that a process of individuation will be precipitated if two disparate orders of reality interact with one another, that is, the potentiality of two disparate orders of reality to become a new system (Simondon [1958] 2013, 31). Or, with respect to the system that will be formed, i.e. with respect to the process of individuation that is potentially triggered, information describes the possibility of a change in a system such that it passes from a pre-individual state (disparate orders of reality) into a process of individuation (Simondon [1958] 2013, 31). The information is the sense (the direction) that a system follows in its process of individuation, or the sense according to which it is individuated, says Simondon (Simondon [1958] 2013, 31). More



exactly, we would have to say that it is the potentiality of sense.<sup>166</sup> Hence, information is what characterizes singularities (gathered in the archive), inasmuch as they have the potentiality to precipitate a process of individuation.<sup>167</sup>

A singularity can precipitate a process of individuation if it encounters an analogous metastable system and they form together a new individuating system (this analogy is for Simondon an ontogenetic reality, while in the understanding proposed here it is the conjunction of an ontogenetic and a phenomenogenetic error)—and, in the context of the theory of individuation, this potential analogy is the proper meaning of information.<sup>168</sup> Conversely, information can be said to characterize the metastable system inasmuch as this system has the potentiality to be precipitated into a process of individuation by the encounter with an analogous singularity or set of singularities (that is, to form together a new individuating system). To formulate this in the terms set up in the first chapter, information is the potentiality of the emergence of an assemblage of intensities and of its diagrammatic space of potential *becoming* at the intersection of different orders of reality. And singularities are singularities inasmuch as they afford information.

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<sup>166</sup> The slight difference between the formulation attempted in this text and Simondon's allows us to distinguish between sense as a vector in the process of individuation (which is compatible with Deleuze's definition of sense in *Difference and Repetition*) and information as the potentiality of sense, which describes the relation between different orders of reality in the pre-individual being.

<sup>167</sup> For this reason, asking if the archive is a problematic regarding singularities or one regarding the associated milieu—the pre-individual problematic—is misleading. It is both at the same time, and necessarily so. And this time there is no paradox: a singularity is a singularity inasmuch as it affords a dynamic relation between an individual and its associated milieu. Thus, the archive as a system of singularities necessarily opens an associated milieu, or rather it opens a couple individual/associated milieu.

<sup>168</sup> For Simondon's view of the relation between singularities and information, that I draw on, see (Simondon [1958] 1989, 48-60), with attention to footnotes 8-13.

From this perspective, the threshold between physical and vital individuation has to do with different dynamics of information. The living individual is a physical individual that remains recursively opened towards its problematic field (i.e. the metastable problematic is never fully stabilized, but only partially resolved) by remaining susceptible to the further encounter with singularities from its associated milieu, and hence the living individual amplifies and continues a process of individuation. Importantly, this also means that the living individual is continuously modified as it negotiates its problematic field, and that it introduces itself as an informational node in the very problematic that it is negotiating (cf. Simondon [1958] 2013, 27-28). For Simondon, a machine, a computer, does not operate with information in the same way, because it does not have access by itself to its pre-individual problematic in such a way that its own being (in relationship with the associated milieu) is continuously and un-teleologically evolving beyond simply adapting its behavior to its associated milieu (cf. Simondon [1958] 2013, 28)—for Simondon, a machine operates with forms, with signals, not with information (Simondon [1958] 2013, 35; Simondon [1958] 1989, 137). That posits Simondon in contradiction with the mainstream theory of information adopted by cybernetics, and allows the theory of individuation to emerge as a paradigm that could potentially problematize some of the inherent prejudices of contemporary digital cultures and offer much needed alternatives.

A number of interesting recent theoretical accounts inspired by the theory of individuation proceed to navigate this gap between information as defined in cybernetics and information as understood by Simondon. In the field of net art<sup>(?)</sup>, Ceci Moss, in a discussion of 'expanded internet art'—art<sup>(?)</sup> practices that critically inhabit network culture—, operates a critique of the biases of the theory of information utilized by cybernetics and subsequently by modern computer technology, arguing that 'the problem with cybernetics is its basis in probability and control as the central determining factor in its ontology' (Moss 2019, 67) and that a more fluid theory of information as symbiotic genesis

(based on insights from biological sciences) is possible (Moss 2019, 67-68). Building on the work of Tiziana Terranova, Mark B.N. Hansen, and Bernard Stiegler, Moss proposes that we live in an *informational milieu*—understood as a symbiosis between contemporary informational technology, environment and ~~human~~ experience (Moss 2019, 68, 76)—and that 'expanded internet art practices' are ways of critically negotiating the informational milieu and the crises it engenders (Moss 2019, 76).

In the understanding proposed in this project, the idea of an informational milieu is intriguing, since in my reading of Simondon, information is the very potentiality of the couple individual-milieu, of their intertwined becoming. What Moss calls informational milieu maps here onto the problematic of the archive—the systems of singularities (singularities inasmuch as they harbour information) that form the actual grounds of processes of individuation.<sup>169</sup> The immediate problem of critically approaching what Moss calls the informational milieu is that of differentiating, with Simondon, between information as the potential for a process of individuation to happen and information as form, as signal (as it emerges in cybernetic discourse).

With respect to *Genesis* (yes, this is still a reading of *Genesis*, nothing but a reading of *Genesis*), information is, from the perspective proposed here, the potentiality of living bacteria to misspell the law. It is the living bacteria which bring information in the complex technological network inherent in *Genesis* (a technological network that includes the internet)—and, on another level, information emerges with the process of specta(c)torship, namely, if a process of psychic individuation is to happen such that thinking emerges against thought. The technological network considered in itself

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<sup>169</sup> This mapping is not without contradictions. Not incidentally, these contradictions have to do with the emergence of identity in the informational milieu—my position being that it is always already inherent as an error.

is devoid of information, it merely operates with signals, with forms. Despite an increasingly complex recursivity through which technological systems adapt to their environments, they do not modify their own structure in such a way that both themselves and their environment become towards something different and impossible to predict in advance. At first glance this proposition seems to go directly against the understanding of digital technology proposed by Yuk Hui, building on the work of Simondon and Stiegler.

In *Recursivity and Contingency* Hui understands cybernetics as being part of a philosophical paradigm predicated on *organicism*, and thus information as defined in cybernetics is from this perspective always interlinked with an understanding of the living organism (Hui 2019, §1). For Yuk Hui, a bridge between the definitions of information formulated by Shannon and Wiener on the one hand, and Simondon's on the other, could be constructed by considering Bateson's work (Hui 2019, §4, §23). In this sense Hui insists on a 'becoming organic' of machines, and understands current digital technologies as an 'inorganic organicity' which functions recursively to produce its own structures and patterns (Hui 2019, §37). I do in fact agree with Hui's analysis, but only if we include the relationship between technology and embodied thinking (<strike>human</strike> and otherwise) as an integral part of this 'inorganic organicity'—which is often the case in Hui's work. I do not agree, though, that the digital technological complex can be seen as producing by itself its own structures and patterns, at least not to the extent that it would trigger a process of individuation that creates new individuals and new worlds. Technological individuals can learn to adapt to a given environment (can gain orientation), but they do not (dis)orient the very space of potentiality that grounds the being of these environments and their own relationship with them, i.e. technological individuals, unlike the bacteria of *Genesis*, do not misspell the law in such a way that new worlds can emerge (i.e. from an ontogenetic perspective: an evolution of species and an evolution of their respective phenomenological planes). In other words, the difference between a system of living

individuals in processes of vital individuation and systems of technological individuals is the existence in the first and absence in the second of anarchival events.

This position has to be immediately qualified in two respects. First, this is not to say that the technological network *de jure* cannot reach the point of performing anarchival events that (dis)orient the very problematic that drives its becoming, but only to point out that this does not seem to be the case *de facto* as yet. Or, in other words, that in order to understand the individuation processes that contemporary digital technologies are inscribed in we have to take into account the bodies of the programmers who write the software, the bodies of the scientists and technicians whose work is indispensable for constructing the technological network, the bodies of the workers who train AI algorithms, the bodies of the users, etc. Second, new associated milieux and new problematic fields do emerge through technology, it is just that the actual individuals contoured in this process (the individuals coupled with these associated milieux) are not technological individuals *per se* (and, I will argue later, neither ~~human~~ individuals) but something in-between what would have been ~~human~~ bodies and what would have been their technological prostheses.<sup>170</sup>

For these reasons, the discrepancy between the position developed here, and Hui's arguments is much more subtle than it first seems. It does have important consequences though, as it allows us to keep open the problematic of the thinking body, rather than collapsing it into the figures of the 'intelligent' machine and of the ~~human~~ body. I will propose in the next chapter, through a reading of relevant fragments from Stiegler's take on technological individuation in *Technics and Time*, that a ~~human~~ body is likewise devoid of information (at the level of psychic individuation, with respect to *thought* and *thinking*), and further that it is only the

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<sup>170</sup> I develop further on this problem in *Chapter V*.

unknowable embodied thinking individual (de)constructing itself<sup>9</sup>) in the very thinking of which it is the active patient, that affords information. And it is in relation to this kind of fragile and ill-defined body that one can observe the anarchival events that (dis)orient the archive—inasmuch as the systems of singularities that this body carries with it and opens itself towards can precipitate a process of individuation that restructures the very conditions of individuation.

Embodied *thinking* is the dynamic intersection of the vital archive that comprises (among other structures) the cells of our nervous system with the collective 'cultural' archives (with their inherent technological and political aspects). But this is not enough. In order for thinking to happen (in order for the 'cultural' archive to become against itself through *thinking*) there is a need for another (anomalous) singularity that destabilizes *thought*, for an anarchival event that (dis)orients the 'cultural' archive (itself a system of singularities) towards its non-teleological becoming. Deleuze insists that this seed of *thinking* (against *thought*) is the atypical intensive experience, the 'sentiendum' (Deleuze [1968] 1993, 182-184)—a sensible experience that cannot be canceled in recognition, a singularity—that is, the encounter with the world as intensive fields not yet entirely canceled in Nature, not yet canceled in representation (although always already in the process of being canceled).

The <strike>human</strike> body is a well established and already institutionalized (also nationalized, capitalized etc.) canalization of this intensive encounter into a pre-established trajectory that cancels its disturbances: 'Let man have dominion...'. A dam on a turbulent river. Psychic individuation proper, can be said to happen only with the overflow, only with the problematization of this trajectory, with the emergence of *thinking* in (and against) *thought* (in and against recognition and representation, in and against the <strike>human</strike> body).

The crisis of identity (the locus of psychic individuation)—the individual erring in search of the absolute otherness that itself<sup>(?)</sup> (never quite) is, the individual (de)constructed by the thinking that comes to happen in thought—opens through the encounter with the *sentiendum*. At the borders of psychic individuation, information, properly speaking, is the potentiality of this crisis. Yet this crisis can emerge only as an anarchival event upon the archival background. The *sentiendum* is atypical with respect to the archives that ground *thought* and comes to happen only inasmuch as these archives afford the negotiation of an irregularity, the negotiation of otherness. Information has to be understood as the name of this affordance.

Psychic individuation, as the becoming of the embodied thinking subject towards the unknown inasmuch as the individual opens itself up as a question, is the event of a fundamental encounter between the 'cultural' and vital archives and the atypical intensive experience, if this anarchival encounter is to happen (if the system is characterized by information)—that is, if the encounter is not foreclosed by the image that the individual has of itself, by a *dogmatic image of thought* that rests on an identification of the individual with itself, which in turn subtends and is subtended by an unquestioned principle of identity. The movements that we perform in 'cultural' archives (that striate the phenomenological plane) in order to (de)construct our identities, because they necessarily bear on the very being and becoming of the thinking subject, redefine the individual in its relation to the associated milieu (the world always becoming towards Nature). What *Genesis* reveals (in hiding) is that the negotiation of the archive—by an individual (spectator) erring (in the *intimacy of the common*) in search of an unattainable self (the process of specta(c)torship)—participates both in the production of the embodied individual and in the production of its associated milieu, inasmuch as it is acts upon the dynamic conjunction between the 'cultural' archive and Nature, inasmuch as it is a *mise-en-abîme* of one through the other.

We should distinguish at least three different aspects of this *mise-en-abîme* of the relationship between 'culture' and Nature as it is performed by *Genesis*. First, on a practical, literal level, the inscription of the 'cultural' archive (the Biblical fragment, but also the critique of anthropocentrism that drives the choice of this text) in the genetic one, and the process by which they disturb each other, expose the deep ontogenetic changes to the logic of the shallow and rapid alterations of the 'cultural' archive, the origin of life comes to be a superficial matter, a matter of the logic of the surface, and the surface itself is disturbed and (dis)oriented in this process. Yet genetic manipulation is only one contemporary form of short-circuiting this 'culture'/Nature dynamic (with immense dangers and promises). The folding of the 'cultural' archive into Nature is a modality of the fundamental folding of the phenomenological plane into the ontogenetic dynamic, a folding that exists before and beyond contemporary bio-technology as the very process of vital individuation. 'Cultural' archives (with their technological and political aspects), as striations of the phenomenological plane, come to striate the very origin of ontogenesis, even if they are nothing but the result of ontogenesis. As I was insisting above, 'cultural' archives, the epistemic context that they define and the specific phenomenological planes that they striate, are intrinsic to what the genetic code in its bio-chemical immediacy is. So, second, the *mise-en-abîme* performed by *Genesis* metaphorically points out that life as we know it is dependent on how we know it (on contingent phenomenological planes and the 'cultural' archives that striate them) and that it continuously overflows this knowledge (life as an intensive process is only approximately captured in the actuality of concepts and formulas). But also, third, *Genesis* let us glimpse in a playful manner the basic feedback loop through which the 'cultural' archive itself is (dis)oriented by the intensive processes of life, while at the same time being intrinsic to what life is, from the very beginning. Living as misspelling the law, as misspelling the 'cultural' archive folded into ontogenesis as an originary lack of origin: 'LET AAN HAVE DOMINION OVER THE FISH OF THE SEA AND



OVER THE FOWLOF THE AIR AND OVER EVERY LIVING THING THAT IOVES UA EON  
THE EARTH'.

To conclude this portion of our erring, the problematic of the *archive* is that of the folding of the phenomenological plane into ontogenesis. The archive is understood as a system of singularities that can afford the crossing of thresholds between different planes of individuation: the chemical compounds of the genetic code are an archive that subtends the possibility of vital individuation; the network of neurons is an archive that subtends the possibility of psychic individuation etc. Yet, to a certain extent, these archives are always already informed by the 'cultural' archives of psychic individuation. The (absurd, out of tune, false) question that interests us now is: what are the consequences of new archival practices in net art<sup>(?)</sup>, in view of this ontogenetic/phenomenogenetic conjunction and of the role of 'cultural' archives in it? I will turn to 'networks of care' as an emergent archival practice (Dekker 2018), with reference to the online software art<sup>(?)</sup> repository [runme.org](http://runme.org), and to Derrida's understanding of the archive in *Archive Fever*, in order to follow this question.

#### **IV.4. Runme.org**

[runme.org](http://runme.org) is a repository for software art<sup>(?)</sup> that is active since 2003. The core team behind the project includes Alexei Shulgin, Olga Goriunova, Amy Alexander, and Alex McLean but it also relied on the frequent contributions of a larger group of 'experts' and non-experts. According to Olga Goriunova, there are approximately five hundred works on the platform and about a hundred written features (Goriunova 2012, 128, note 15).

The practice of archiving software art<sup>(?)</sup>, and net art<sup>(?)</sup> more generally, faces a significant challenge because of the fragility and ephemerality of the art<sup>(?)</sup>works—a phenomenon that was already

alluded to with respect to *We See In every Direction*. The fast changing hardware and software environments, the lack of funds to support (maintenance intensive) archives of works that are situated at the periphery of the art system and of the art market, and the fluctuations in the interest of art and cultural institutions towards net art<sup>(?)</sup> practices—itsself dependent on cultural policies and market interests at national and international levels—all contribute to the short life span of net art<sup>(?)</sup> works and net art<sup>(?)</sup> archives.<sup>171</sup> In this context, [runme.org](http://runme.org) is an interesting example that exists in a liminal state between being a functional archive and falling into a digital ruin. And it is in this space between the ways in which [runme.org](http://runme.org) runs and does not run, works and does not work, that its main interest for the present discussion lies.

To outline the situation in straight forward terms: [runme.org](http://runme.org) is still online (which is already an achievement); at the time of this writing, art<sup>(?)</sup>works are still sporadically added into the archive; while many links are broken, still, some of the art<sup>(?)</sup>works are available for download; however, because of software and hardware differences between the present day computer architectures and the ones that the works were built upon and intended for, more often than not, a certain degree of technical expertise is required in order to actually run the works. This underlines the urgency of questions regarding the collection and conservation of net art<sup>(?)</sup>, but it is also significant with respect to the particularities of the process of specta(c)torship that it engenders.

Here, after a short general presentation of [runme.org](http://runme.org), I will introduce Annet Dekker's concept of *networks of care* as a tentative answer to the challenges of archiving net art<sup>(?)</sup>—and as an aspect of the process of specta(c)torship pertinent to such archives —, and through a discussion of the main

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<sup>171</sup> For a discussion of the challenges faced by net art<sup>(?)</sup> archives and a comparative analysis of three different projects involved in such archival practices see (Dekker and Rachel Somers-Miles, 2011).

terms proposed by Jacques Derrida in *Archive Fever*, I further ask what would be the consequences of thinking about archival practices in terms of networks of care.

Initially, [runme.org](http://runme.org) was the submission platform for the *Readme* festival (Goriunova 2012, 76), an early software art<sup>(?)</sup> festival curated by Goriunova, Shulgin and various others,<sup>172</sup> but it soon developed as a separate project of its own. Its architecture was inspired by software download repositories, and it was intended to work in a similar way in order to provide a familiar environment not only for artists but for anyone interested in coding and programming (Goriunova 2012, 71-2). The art<sup>(?)</sup>works were in some cases directly uploaded in the repository and in others linked to the platform from external resources.

The front end interface, that the users interact with, presents the main webpage interface divided into three columns. On the left side, there is a list of categories and subcategories predefined by the moderators, but that can also change according to the needs and requests of the community (Goriunova 2012, 80). The categories were meant to be 'diverse, contradictory and funny', in a way that is inspiring for practitioners and spectators, and not a strict and well defined taxonomy (Goriunova 2012, 76-8). On the right side, there is a 'keyword cloud', which helps localizing projects by keywords chosen by the artists to describe their works, creating thus a less rigid structure that Goriunova calls a 'folksonomy' (Goriunova 2012, 72). The central column contains a 'subscribe' section, followed by a list of latest projects added to the repository. Also in the central column, there is a 'featured projects' section which reflects the commitment to yearly invite practitioners and theorists in the field to choose what they consider to be the best projects (Goriunova 2012, 72). The 'featured projects' was seen as a response to the perceived bias of the

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<sup>172</sup> The festival was held in Moscow (2002), Helsinki (2003), Aarhus (2004) and Dortmund (2005). (Goriunova 2012, 130, note 34).

prizes offered by big new media art festivals, and especially *Ars Electronica* (Goriunova 2012, 73), underlying once more the tension between art institutions and net art<sup>(?)</sup> practices.<sup>173</sup> Allowing a relatively large number of projects to be featured together, instead of creating hierarchies in a multitude of dubiously constructed categories (dubious, because the art<sup>(?)</sup> practice itself tends to overpass the limits between them), [runme.org](http://runme.org) tried to offer an alternative approach.

A quick mention of some of the projects collected on [runme.org](http://runme.org) can give us an idea of the kind of works that the spectator encounters: *Chapter II* already mentioned *TEMPEST for Eliza* by Erik Thiele, which uses the computer monitor to send out AM radio signals that a nearby short-wave radio receiver can render as sounds recognizable as a version of Beethoven's *Fur Elise*; *Naked on Pluto* (2010-2013), added in 2012, is a multiplayer text game by Dave Griffiths, Aymeric Mansoux and Marloes de Valk, first developed in 2010, which pits the players against 57 AI bots that glean Facebook data from the subscribers to the game (the link to the project is presently broken);<sup>174</sup> *100.000.000 stolen pixels* (2010), by Kim Asendorf is a bot that crawls the web, steals 100 pixels from each image that it comes across and appends them to a new image file that it creates, until it reaches the 100.000.000 stolen pixels mentioned in the title.<sup>175</sup>

The spectator first encounters the documentation of these works—short description, images, etc.—and then can choose to download the actual software or to follow the link to the 'home page' of the project (depending if the art<sup>(?)</sup>work is stored by [runme.org](http://runme.org) or linked from an external resource).

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<sup>173</sup> I am interested throughout this project in this tension as a problematic pertinent to net art<sup>(?)</sup>, without excluding for that matter projects that are exhibited in a mainstream institutional context (including the *Ars Electronica* festival).

<sup>174</sup> For a discussion of *Naked on Pluto* see (Dekker 2018, 99). For the entry on [runme.org](http://runme.org): <http://runme.org/project/+naked-on-pluto/>.

<sup>175</sup> For the entry on [runme.org](http://runme.org): <http://runme.org/project/+100-000-000/>.

Some links to external pages work, while some do not work anymore (as it is the case with *Naked on Pluto*). Once the art(?)work downloaded, the spectator is faced with the responsibility to make it work, and is more often than not in a position to actually modify the original art(?)work in order to be able to run it. Those of us without the necessary technical skills are faced with the art(?)work as a kind of suspended promise, but a suspension that nonetheless brings with it a space of potential interactions—a space of potential interactions that we have access to only in the mode of failing to access it. I will come back to this shortly.

For now, back to the archive. [Runme.org](http://runme.org) was opened for anyone who wished to submit their projects, but it was strictly moderated. The submitted works required the administrators' approval before being made public on the website, and the decision depended not only on the work being suitable for the archive but also on whether it fit what the moderators considered to be the state of the field, and whether it was deemed to be an interesting addition to the collection (Goriunova 2012, 72). It is important to note that, as mentioned before, [runme.org](http://runme.org) was addressed not only to artists but to anyone who tinkered with code and produced intriguing results. Controversially, the submission of *found digital objects*, interesting pieces of code freely available on the internet (anonymous or not), was also encouraged (Goriunova 2012, 80). Thus the problem of an archival system that, while challenging traditional criteria at work in the archival practices of the art-world, nonetheless retains elements of the traditional structure of the archive—its grounding in the political and legal power of the *archon* (in this case the moderators). Nonetheless (we will see), at the very same time, the process of specta(c)torship that [runme.org](http://runme.org) affords, comes to decenter this traditional structure and throw it into crisis.

The art historical significance of [runme.org](http://runme.org) is twofold, both as a project that contributed to the development of the net art(?) and software art(?) scene in the two-thousands and also as an important

archival model for so called 'born digital' art. Annet Dekker and Rachel Somers-Miles in their research project *Archiving the Digital*<sup>176</sup> chose [runme.org](http://runme.org) as one of their case studies (the other two being [turbulence.org](http://turbulence.org) and AktiveArchive) in an investigation meant to throw light on different possible paradigms for archiving net art(?) and software art(?). They identified the main characteristics of [runme.org](http://runme.org) to be: that the archiving initiative is organized and set-up from within the community (which is not limited to artists but also includes programmers, academics, and others willing to explore unconventional coding projects); that it is non-institutional and organic, including also non-art projects (although, we should remember the function of the moderators as a limit to this 'organicity'); and that, in terms of financial means, it is voluntary based, with very limited arts funding (some funding was available in the early stages of the project through the Readme festival, because [runme.org](http://runme.org) functioned as its submission platform) (Dekker and Somers-Miles 2011, 30). Another crucial aspect is that [runme.org](http://runme.org) was an international collaboration with no specific geographical tie (Dekker and Somers-Miles 2011, 13). This arrangement allowed for extra degrees of freedom since it did not directly depend on fluctuations in national policies but, at the same time, it meant financial fragility because of the lack of access to funding opportunities (Dekker and Somers-Miles 2011, 13).

The question is: how to understand the experience that [runme.org](http://runme.org) proposes? Is there anything significantly different that opens up in this archival practice?

In *Collecting and Conserving Net Art* (2018) Annet Dekker argues that the conservation of net art(?) works might depend on developing networks of care—networked, community-driven conservation strategies—rather than relying exclusively on the ways in which big organizations and institutions

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<sup>176</sup> The publication resulted from this project is available online at: <http://aaaan.net/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/archiving-the-digital.pdf>, accessed 17.09.2018.

can systematically approach the archiving and preservation of such works. Instead of traditional institutions, it is a collective of individuals and small organizations that look after the legacy of an artist or a specific work, (or a repository of works, in the case of [runme.org](http://runme.org)) a combination of experts and non-specialists keep the work alive and evolving rather than simply preserving one of its specific instances (Dekker 2018, 89-90).

The idea of networks of care is relevant for [runme.org](http://runme.org). The earlier success and the current survival of [runme.org](http://runme.org) are dependent on the dedication of a small group of people, passionate about a collection of works, and less on institutional support. It functions as a loosely defined community centered around a core team, but not limited to it. Also, it creates networks of care by giving an audience to peripheral art<sup>(?)</sup> practices overlooked by the traditional art-world, that do not quite fit in the institutional context, as it is the case for example with the *found digital objects* that it collected. But more than that, it is the peculiar position of the spectator that resonates with the practice of networks of care. It is the spectator who is put in the position of looking after the work, of making it run, and the failure to do so is a specific negative modality of this *care*.

Networks of care respond to a fundamental problem of archiving net art<sup>(?)</sup>: many net art<sup>(?)</sup> practices, starting from the very early days of the field, are less concerned with finalized art<sup>(?)</sup> objects as such and more with the distributed space of relations that is instantiated and navigated by the works; the art<sup>(?)</sup>works often evolve over time and have different versions, responding to technological updates and to socio-political-economic dynamics (which is to say that many of the works, rather than stable objects, are dynamic assemblages of relations).<sup>177</sup> From an archival perspective, initially the question is: which versions of an art<sup>(?)</sup>work are to be preserved and which not? But it quickly

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<sup>177</sup> For theoretical discourses that examine net art<sup>(?)</sup> works as dynamic relational fields rather than stable objects, see the *Introduction*.

mutates to: how to preserve something of the complex dynamic assemblages of relations that are integral to the art(?)work? Christiane Paul argues in this sense that “[t]he archiving of the context of net art requires a new understanding of the archive as a 'living' environment that can itself adapt to the changing requirements of the mutable 'records' that it contains” (Paul 2015, 89-90). The networks of care are a tentative answer to this problem (although by no means a universal, definitive solution). The art(?)work (or, the repository of art(?)works) is preserved along with, and only through, the community that coagulates around it. As Dekker explains in an interview with Melanie Bühler, what is at stake in an archival practice predicated on networks of care is 'social and cultural preservation' and not only the preservation of the material components of an art(?)work. This entails a shift in focus towards the dispersed networks of knowledge entailed by a net art(?)work. It is an archival practice that favors context and localized knowledge, avoids standardization and ensures variability rather than creating a stable state (Dekker and Bühler 2015, 96-7).

It is not the place here to enter a debate about whether networks of care constitute a better archiving paradigm than those offered by state supported institutions and big organizations. In practical terms my position is straight forward: we need both approaches (with their respective advantages and disadvantages), and any other alternative we can imagine in between for trying to archive part of the fascinating practices that are developing and disappearing at a fast rate somewhere at the peripheries of our digital worlds. What needs pointing out, though, is that the networks of care, of which [runme.org](http://runme.org) is a good example, do place in a new light the practice of specta(c)torship in net art(?). The spectator, downloading, running, sharing, and even modifying the work in order to make it run on new platforms (or failing to do so) becomes an essential part of the complex system that makes the art(?)work happen and potentially preserves it. Specta(c)torship in this case means being inscribed in a network of care.



So, what are the fundamental consequences of this new type of archival practice?

Let us turn to the work of Jacques Derrida in order to unpack this problematic. In *Archive Fever*, playing on the etymology of the word 'archive' and of its root—the greek 'arkhē'—Derrida discerns initially between two principles that operate in the concept of 'archive': the principle of *commencement* and the principle of *commandment*. What is implicitly at work in any archival practice is a physical, historical and ontological beginning, but also a nomological aspect. *Archē* is the original, the first, the primitive and, at the same time, the command, the law. The archive is where things *commence* and simultaneously where authority is exercised, the place from which order is given (Derrida 1996, 1-2).

But (as always with Derrida's writing) it would be an oversimplification to reduce the problem of the archive to this duality, '[t]here is always more than one—and more or less than two' (Derrida 1996, 1-2). The *archē* as commencement, according to Derrida, already introduces 'a chain of belated and problematic oppositions' that are present in the nomological principle, namely those between '*physis* and its others', between Nature and history (Derrida 1996, 1). And neither *physis* nor 'its others' are simple coherent unities or dualities, but in their turn they contain numerous cleavages that reveal them as divergent multiplicities. *Archē*, in this account, is the beginning, the primordial, but a beginning which is already informed by the law, by the social order, a beginning that has a history. A history that in its turn can be (de)constructed. The archive shelters the conflicting meanings of the *archē*, but at the very same time it conceals them, it prevents them from coming forth; the conflation of law and origin, of commandment and commencement, remains hidden in the archive, archived in the noun itself, thus public, but nonetheless secret—the law disguises itself as origin. In other words, the epistemological framework (thought), on (and against) which thinking errs, acts as the ground of ontogenesis—as the origin of the erring through which

itself (the epistemological framework, thought) will have emerged. (Hence the problematic of the archive as the problematic of the conjunction between the phenomenological plane that subtends and shines through our epistemological frameworks and the ontogenesis).

Etymologically, according to Derrida, 'archive' inherits its 'arkhē' via the 'arkheion', the residence of the archons, the dwelling of those who rule, the house of the magistrates that have the right to make and represent the law (Derrida 1996, 2). Thus a topological dimension is inherent in the archive and it underlies the nomological one, a 'topo-nomology' as Derrida put it. To archive means to shelter in a place of privilege—the 'arkheion', the residence of the *archons*, the archive; the law is a law as long as it is pronounced, deposited and guarded in the proper place. Another aspect of the archontic principle of the archive is that of *consignation* which for Derrida means not only to consign, to deposit (which would be another way of talking about the topo-nomological dimension), but also 'gathering together signs' creating a single corpus, a system which articulates itself as a unity (Derrida 1996, 3). The *arkhē* is a principle of homogenization: there is a system of forces, inherent in the background that the archive is, that accounts for the agglutination of the fragments clustered upon this background towards the lines of an official language, of a master-narrative.

The interplay of topology and consignation in the order of commandment and the intertwining of commandment and commencement that was briefly sketched above, are far from exhaustively explaining the dynamics of the archive (or Derrida's account of these dynamics). Nonetheless, for now they will suffice to point out some of the fundamental problems that are at stake in the practice of specta(c)torship as it emerges in the context of networks of care. How does Derrida's framework translate to the situation of [runme.org](http://runme.org) as a network of care where the task of collecting and conserving is transferred from state institutions, and big cultural actors—the few 'archons' and their

residence—to a distributed network of spectators?<sup>178</sup> What are the systems of power and signification made possible by this shift, and what are the ontological (rather *ontogenetic*) consequences?

First, we should note that the consignation supposed by the gesture of archiving, is transformed from a principle of homogeneity into one of heterogeneity. The interplay of vectors of homogeneity and heterogeneity in the archive is nothing new, this is what *archive fever* names: an anarchival drive towards heterogeneity at the very core of the archive. Yet the dynamics of this interplay are fundamentally disturbed. In a distributed network of interrelated nodes of collection and conservation—in which each particular network of care is formed by multiple nodes and is forming (in its turn) a node in the archival system which is the network of these networks—the consignation is necessarily plural, particular to every node, and thus there is a multitude of regimes of signs. For the spectator of [runme.org](http://runme.org) this heterogeneity of consignation emerges for example as the requirement to tinker with the art<sup>(?)</sup>works in order to make them functional—which involves at least a basic understanding of the different scripting and programming languages of the works (some of these languages already obsolete, or at least outside current mainstream programming practices).

On another lever, the tendency towards heterogeneity of consignation is also conspicuous in the relative abundance in the repository of works that engage with text processing and computationally driven destabilizations of language.<sup>179</sup> This is not only a particularity of [runme.org](http://runme.org) but, more

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<sup>178</sup> And the fact that, to a certain extent, the archontic function is kept by the moderators (spectators in a certain position of privilege) underlines the essential continuity between a classical archival model and networks of care.

<sup>179</sup> See especially the category 'text manipulation' on [runme.org](http://runme.org), but relevant works can also be found in the subcategories 'ascii art', 'code poetry', or 'narrative'.

generally, an essential thread in net art<sup>(?)</sup> practices and net art<sup>(?)</sup> specta(c)torship.<sup>180</sup> Playing with language, constructing local dialects, is inherent in the coagulation of online communities, and net art<sup>(?)</sup> practices explore the limits and the consequences of this situation.<sup>181</sup>

Also, the vectors of consignment rely on organizing, on creating categories that introduce order and hierarchy in the system. In the case of runme.org, the moderators chose to offer a self-contradictory, Borgesian, list of categories, complemented and further disturbed by the 'folksonomy' (the keyword cloud) that emerges from the community, and complicated by the 'featured projects' list. It is not an anarchic lack of order, but an anarchival deconstruction of the expected order (logic) of the archive from the inside, a destabilization that means in specta(c)torship the necessity to navigate an environment that is to a certain extent disorienting, the necessity for the spectator to continuously (dis)orient oneself<sup>(?)</sup> in this environment, rather than being oriented by default.

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<sup>180</sup> For a recent example of online networks of care that operate in a multitude of incongruent systems of signs and between different languages see Mitch Anzuoni's article on rhizome.org 'True Fans Translate: Fansubbing BookStory. A Japanese bookstore simulator is collaboratively translated into English after 24 years' (Anzuoni 2021).

<sup>181</sup> Worth mentioning in this respect, for example, *Mezangelle* (1994 - ongoing), the code poetry project of Mez Breeze. A version of the project is archived in Rhizome's *Net Art Anthology*, the spectator can sign up to receive forty-three of the poems by email over the course of one year, in the same order and pacing that they were sent by the artist on the 7-11 email list in the late 1990's. Mez Breeze explains the project: '+I. RE.ROUTE. LANGUAGE. VIA. NET.BASED. MECHANISMS. THAT. ALLOW. 4. N.HANCED. LATERAL. SIGNIFICATION. OR. AS.SIM][PLE][ILATION.+ (https://anthology.rhizome.org/mez-breeze). Note the archival practice implemented by Rhizome in this case (arguably another example tending towards networks of care rather than traditional archival practices, inasmuch as it is concerned with the dynamic experience that the work opens up rather than the preservation of a stable object): the spectator is asked to subscribe using their email address in order to receive forty-three Mezangelle emails in their inbox over the course of a year, 're-performed in the same order and pacing as their original transmission' (https://anthology.rhizome.org/mez-breeze).

On a pragmatic level the heterogeneity of consignation means that a community underlined by such an archival system, and each of its individuals, would have to exist and develop in a multitude of interrelated, superimposed and at times contradictory systems of signs. Not one official language and a tendency to construct overarching identities but a multiplicity of dialects and subcultures that continuously negotiate with each other—with each individual being relentlessly (de)constructed at the intersection of multiple and incongruent systems of signs.<sup>182</sup>

Note the difference between a multitude of archives that nonetheless strive towards homogeneity and an archival practice that is constitutively heterogenous (a network of unstable nodes, where each node tends towards coagulating a different system of signification). This heterogeneity is far from being a utopian promise, the menace of the 'anarchic' (of death) is probably closer than ever, and yet this new folding of the *archive fever* (anarchontic, archiviolithic, anarchival) into the very archive that it makes possible and that at the same time it menaces, forces us to rethink the functioning of the archive. And the functioning of the archive is always at the same time the functioning of the communities that it subtends.

The topological dimension of the archive comes with new challenges too. The place where the archive is sheltered, and on which its authority depends, cannot be in the case of [runme.org](http://runme.org), and more generally in that of the networks of care, described exactly in geographical terms. Yes, it does have a geographical dimension, inasmuch as the network has an undeniable materiality, inasmuch as the servers and cables that support it are deployed in identifiable geographical locations, inasmuch as it consumes resources and impacts the environment. And all the problems and

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<sup>182</sup> The failure to understand the code, for the spectator of [runme.org](http://runme.org), is an indication of the difficulty of living up to the complex task of performing in such archives driven by heterogeneous consignation.

complexities that arise from the materiality of the network are relevant and need an urgent debate.<sup>183</sup> Nonetheless, the locality of a website, the locality of a net art(?) work, the locality of a net art(?) archive, and especially when they are subtended by practices such as networks of care, are not pertinently described by a set of geographical coordinates and by traditional geographical constraints (although these constraints are part of it, they are far from exhausting it, from defining it).

Josephine Berry, in a widely cited PhD thesis entitled *The Thematics of Site Specific Art on the Net* argues that the net affords—and net art(?) engages with—'non-places' that nonetheless are very specific (Berry 2001). Contouring the main premises of this specificity Berry writes:

The location of information objects, as with things in 'real' places to a degree, cannot be read simply from their co-existence with other things as de Certeau has suggested, but also through their functionality which might or might not be transplantable. In this respect, what we might tentatively term 'place' on the Internet, is much closer to a practice than an occupation, which is in fact de Certeau's definition of space: 'space is a place practiced'. [...]

Not only does the Net span the real space of its sprawling infrastructure and the representational space of the screen image (spatial categories hardly without precedent before the advent of the Net), but its totality is also filled with the material and symbolic

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<sup>183</sup> For a consideration of the deep, 'slow', impact of digital technologies upon the environment, that extends beyond what can be formulated in the context of the temporalities experienced by the <strike>human</strike> body see Jussi Parikka's essay *A Slow Contemporary Violence: Damaged Environments of Technological Culture* (2016).

limits common to real space evidenced, for example, in malfunctions or thwarted desires. However where this space is radically different from either physical or older representational forms of space is the immense capacity of the digital to combine heterogeneous parts and thus to create mutations; a capacity which becomes the leverage point of tactical net art and media. (Berry 2001, 183)<sup>184</sup>

We are faced on the internet with a locality that emerges as the in-betweenness of the actants that create the network (and that emerge as actants only through the network), a locality that exists only for as long as the encounter persists.<sup>185</sup> Not one 'archeion' but a multitude. That is to say, a multitude of centers of power, fragile and ephemeral, that coexist and overlap, each of them coagulating a specific territory around itself. A multiplicity of fluctuating localities, only some of which possess a strong geographical dimension. The meaning of the 'here' becomes incredibly complex, not a point on a two-dimensional map precisely defined by longitude and latitude coordinates, but an unstable shape in a multidimensional relational space generated by networks of care. Again, this is far from being a utopian promise, it is rather a very problematic and dangerous topology that needs to be continuously negotiated and renegotiated.

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<sup>184</sup> See also Berry's intervention in the 'Post-Net Aesthetics Conversation London, 2013' moderated by Karen Archey, published in *Mass Effect: Art and the Internet in the Twenty-First Century* (Archey, Berry Slater, et al. 2015, 415).

<sup>185</sup> As Marc Ries notes in *The Discovery of Pure Sociality in Early Net Art* any system of relations is inherently related with 'a spatial practice' (Ries 2009, 69). Far from being unproblematic and liberatory this is the space of an essential crisis that has its promises as well as its dangers. It should be noted that the argument formulated in this text differs from Ries' position in that it is considering the extent to which the individual in its embodied corporeality emerges from the systems of relations in which it is engaged.

The lack of funding faced by projects such as [runme.org](http://runme.org), due to the fact that they do not fit without a remainder within the limits of territorial nation states or inter-national alliances, points towards this strange locality that does not respect traditional geographical constraints, a type of locality that each of us, the spectators, inasmuch as we are online, inhabit and embody. More than that, a multiplicity of fluid places of privilege emerges in [runme.org](http://runme.org) on the one hand with the necessity to download the works, to shelter them on one's own computer in order to modify them and make them work, and on the other hand with the inclusion of works that are linked from external resources that the moderators do not have any kind of authority over. The topological dimension of the archive is (de)constructed in a continuous renegotiation.

The order of commandment of the *arkhē* thus becomes fragmented and divergent. The question is not that of proposing a utopian archive without *archons* (that is just anarchy, death), but rather of observing and analyzing the fragmentation and diversification of the *archontic* principle. [runme.org](http://runme.org) is an interesting example inasmuch as it relies on a small group of moderators that occupy the position of the *archons*, yet the practices that it proposes undermine the authority of the *archons*, problematizing and deconstructing the logic of the archive. From the perspective of consignation this problematization works by introducing a playful list of categories that fail to add up to a reasonable classification, by the implementation of a 'folksonomy' that proposes an alternative bottom-up way of ordering the art(?)works, by challenging the values and practices supported by the institutional art world, and, not least, by instantiating a multiplicity of heterogeneous systems of signs. From the perspective of topology, the logic of the archive is deconstructed by creating distributed and fluid localities of privilege—and the process of specta(c)torship necessarily means participating in the negotiation of these localities.



Thus, the order of commandment, as it emerges in this case, would function as nets of flexible, relative and ever changing laws emanating from (and sheltered in) fragile networks of care. Contradictory laws that intersect, because the localities (and the regimes of signification) that ground them overlap, and need to remain fluid and mobile enough so that the tension between them is fertile and not destructive for the actants that define (and are defined by)—more precisely, that (de)construct and are (de)constructed by—these localities and systems of signs. This, again, is far from being a utopia. In terms of a theory of individuation, it is the erroneous fiction of a *transindividual collective*<sup>186</sup> that would be aware of the relativity of its truths and would consequently proceed to the dangerous, painstaking, yet fertile project of accounting for these truths and negotiating them in and through the system of relations that produces them. The relativity of truth, and accordingly of ethic systems, legal systems, (etc.) does not mean that anything is possible. On the contrary, it means that at every point one has to account for the pertinence of truths with respect to the systems of relations that they are emerging from and to modify them according to the dynamics of these systems. Gone is the comfort of the absolute truth which would shelter us from the painful necessity of thinking (against thought): 'LET AAN HAVE DOMINION OVER THE FISH OF THE SEA AND OVER THE FOWLOF THE AIR AND OVER EVERY LIVING THING THAT IOVES UA EON THE EARTH'—to live is to misspell the truth inscribed as the absolute beginning (the lack of origin). (Yes, this is still a reading of *Genesis*, nothing but a reading of *Genesis*.)

In the end, there is, of course, the question of the beginning, that of the *arkhē* as commencement (as genesis). How will the divergent principles of commandment inscribe themselves in the physical, historical and ontological beginning? Will the distinction between these different planes continue to make sense? Will *physis* remain different from its others? What kind of Nature(s) will be grounded

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<sup>186</sup> For *transindividual collective* see below.

in this new *archē*, in this new 'culture'? And, what kind of bodies? The answer, of course, is to be lived not written.<sup>187</sup> In the sense that phenomenogenesis subtends all lived experience but cannot be pertinently accounted for in discourse—only the disturbances that might provoke it can be, to a certain degree, explained (the archival practices and anarchival events that (dis)orient the dynamics of the phenomenological plane).

Moreover, strictly speaking, phenomenogenesis cannot be *lived*, experienced as such—although it grounds living, experiencing, reading. One only lives the aftermath of phenomenogenesis, the aftermath of misspelling the law, the always partial answer to the problems that the erring of phenomenogenesis opens up. The event of phenomenogenesis is the moment of misspelling the law, when such misspelling is significant enough to displace the phenomenological plane, to displace the world and its canceling into Nature(s). Yet this moment is outside experience, is the lack of origin that grounds experience (it is the movement of *différance* as the lack of origin that grounds the

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<sup>187</sup> Organicist metaphors surrounding archival practices (living archives, organic archives) might be problematic, but they do point us in an important direction: archives are not simply about collections of traces, but about the future ('a-venir') that they afford, that is, archives are about the processes of individuation that they can trigger, at the same time physical, vital, and psychic individuation.

trace).<sup>188</sup> Also, importantly, phenomenogenesis happens only in the intimacy of the common, in an inaccessible in-between: if the phenomenological plane is singular and uncommunicable, although shaped in the intimacy of the common, the event of phenomenogenesis is this very shaping. And, let us underline again, the *genesis* of phenomenogenesis cannot be but an erroneous ontogenetic explanation—the phenomenological plane is flat, superficial, it does not have chronological depth.

The event of phenomenogenesis, in the framework that Derrida sketches in *Archive Fever*, is the (impossible!) moment imagined by (the imaginary) Hanold from Wilhelm Jensen's novel *Gradiva*. Or rather, Derrida's reading of Hanold's 'dream' points towards the event of phenomenogenesis:<sup>189</sup>

'He dreams rather of reliving. But of reliving the other. Of reliving the singular pressure or

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<sup>188</sup> It would be useful to specify the connection between the intensities that subtend the *sentientum* and phenomenogenesis, with respect to experience. According to Deleuze's understanding 'L'intensité est à la fois l'insensible et ce qui ne peut être que senti' (Deleuze [1968] 1993, 297), on the other hand, in a similar formulation, I maintain that phenomenogenesis cannot be lived, experienced, yet is that which grounds living, experiencing. Living is the negotiation of intensive fields that are imperceptible yet ground every perception—this is Deleuze's meaning. For us, phenomenogenesis names the dynamic of the intensive fields. Not only the dynamic of their canceling into representation, and the dynamic of their usual functioning (the phenomenological plane refers to the structure of these dynamics), but the disturbance of the intensive fields such that new intensive fields emerge. At the same time, phenomenogenesis is nothing but an event in ontogenesis, an event in the very 'living, experiencing' that it subtends, yet an event that remains an inaccessible limit for experience; it is that which drives the modification of the phenomenological plane, but that is not encompassed in the phenomenological plane—it accounts for the emergence of different types of intensities, but it is not of the order of intensity. Phenomenogenesis is, then, simply of another order than Deleuzian 'thinking'. If 'thinking' is provoked by the encounter with the *sentientum*, phenomenogenesis names the modification of what comes to be an intensive field, the emergence of new types of *sentientum*.

<sup>189</sup> In Jensen's story, Hanold, a young archeologist, is fascinated by a female figure from an antique roman bas-relief. He names the figure Gradiva—'she who walks'. In the passage that Derrida deconstructs, Hanold obsessively tries to find in the solidified ashes of Pompeii the imprint of Gradiva's steps. I am referring to Derrida's reading of Jensen's novel and of Freud's analysis of the text.

impression which Gradiva's step [*pas*], the step itself, the step of Gradiva herself, that very day, at that time, on that date, in what was inimitable about it, must have left in the ashes' (Derrida 1996, 98-9). The archive shelters information (inasmuch as it is a system of singularities), where information is (in the case of the archives that afford psychic individuation) the potentiality of the *sentiendum*. The step imprinting itself in the ashes, the very moment of the impression, is nothing but the *sentiendum*, the encounter with the world as intensive fields not yet entirely canceled in Nature, not yet canceled in representation (although always already in the process of being canceled). Hanold's longing for the moment of impression is the longing for the 'archē' of the trace, for the absolute origin, for '[...] the uniqueness of the printer-printed, of the impression and the imprint, of the pressure and its trace in the unique *instant* where they are not yet distinguished the one from the other, forming in an *instant* a single body of Gradiva's step, of her gait, of her pace (*Gangart*), and of the ground which carries them' (Derrida 1996, 99). This longing for the *sentiendum*, for the unrecognizable and un-representable presence, this longing for presence beyond representation, for ontogenesis outside of the phenomenological plane, is what Derrida calls *archive fever*. And it is certainly aporetic.

It is the *sentiendum*, an impossible presence before presence (impression before the distinction of impression and imprint), that drives any archival practice, yet the *sentiendum*, at the same time, is that which cannot be archived, by definition, that which cannot be re-presented, that which strictly speaking cannot be made present: an anarchival event. Moreover the immediate presence before presence (before representation) that one longs for is always already permeated by the mediation of representation. The unrecognizable *sentiendum* is always the impossible limit of a system of representation.

The event of phenomenogenesis, the misspelling of the law (of the 'cultural' archive inscribed as origin), is the event that (disturbing the archive) opens the potential for a new kind of *sentiendum* (that does not exist, until it will have existed since forever). (Which means that the closest one can get to grasp phenomenogenesis is as *erroneous information*, an information that harbours the potentiality of a *sentiendum* that hitherto does not exist, an information that is not information until it will have opened up towards this *sentiendum*). Hanold's dream of 'reliving the other' (experiencing presence as other) points in this sense, beyond a longing for the *sentiendum* towards a longing for phenomenogenesis, a longing for living an impossible present other to presence, other to the phenomenological plane that is one's world (longing for a *sentiendum* yet to be and unimaginable).

If the emergence of new archival practices, networks of care among them, rather than a novel trend strictly related to net art<sup>(?)</sup> is an expression and extension of a more general variation in our 'cultural' archives—that is, if [runme.org](http://runme.org)'s relevance is not as an exception but as an instance of a fundamental socio-political shift afforded by contemporary technological networks—, then we are in all likelihood already experiencing on (or as) our own<sup>(?)</sup> bodies the aftermath of the phenomenogenetic error afforded by these new archival systems (again, not as an unproblematic utopia, but as a dangerous yet fascinating error). That is, these new archival practices inform a crisis of identity with respect to the embodied thinking subjects that we (never quite) are, a (de)construction of embodied subjectivity that brings with it new intensive dynamics on our phenomenological planes—intensive dynamics, that once they happen, were there since forever.

In brief, this section is teasing out a change in the dynamics of the archive (pointed out by Dekker's concept of networks of care) pertinent to the process of net art<sup>(?)</sup> specta(c)torship, a change that has a double political and ontogenetic stake (the order of commandment and the order of

commencement). I understand Derrida's theory of the archive, in line with the problematic of the emergence of identity that was discussed in the previous chapter, and interlinked with the discussion of *Genesis* above, as the dynamic of a specific phenomenological plane and epistemological framework folded into the ontogenetic origin. Thus the shift that networks of care seem to point towards can be understood as an event that could provoke a phenomenogenetic erring, a disturbance that could reconfigure the ground upon which ontogenesis happens and can be thought. A disturbance that, following Derrida, has an intrinsic political dimension (a principle of commandment folded into the order of commencement), a disturbance that, we will see (in line with Derrida's argument), is also inherently technological.

This digression into archives and archival practices underlined that the event of phenomenogenesis (and its folding into ontogenesis) is related to the dynamics of 'cultural' archives, and arrived at the insight that the closest instance to the phenomenogenetic event that is accessible in experience is a sort of erroneous information, an information that would afford a *sentendum* that hitherto does not exist. The following chapter will unpack this line of thought in the terms of the theory of individuation, by discussing psychic individuation and its dependence on the transindividual collective on the one hand, and technology on the other. This will bring us to the point where an understanding of specta(c)torship as a process of individuation can finally be formulated more rigorously, and the specificity of net art<sup>(?)</sup> specta(c)torship can be addressed.

# Chapter V: Psychic Individuation, Transindividual Collective and the Question of Technology

The problematic of psychic individuation is the problematic of embodied thinking. We have already seen though that thinking means encountering the *sentientum* and that consequently it is related with a crisis of identity. Hence, we will have to understand psychic individuation as the problematic of the (de)construction of the embodied thinking subject.<sup>190</sup> Unavoidably, the previous discussion of 'cultural' archives already touched on the process of psychic individuation—inasmuch as 'cultural' archives are a product of psychic individuation. Nonetheless, the process of psychic individuation can be properly addressed only once we understand the problematic of 'cultural' archives (because what is at stake in 'cultural' archives is exactly the potentiality of psychic individuation), their folding into the ontogenetic beginning (as a lack of origin), and their dynamic relations with other types of archives (the system of neurons as a vital archive, technology as a form of archiving etc.).

This chapter unpacks the problematic of psychic individuation with special attention to its political aspect (it happens only in the intimacy of the common) and to its inherent intertwining with technology. It will engage with Simondon's theory of technology and its developments in Bernard Stiegler's work in order to argue that psychic individuation cannot happen for a 'technological object' nor for a <strike>human</strike> body, but only for an undefinable body always in search of its definition, for a body that is thrown into a crisis of identity. Subsequently, building on a critical discussion of Yuk Hui's theory of digital objects, the chapter will attempt to unpack this problematic in the context of contemporary digital technologies and the internet. Upon this background it will

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<sup>190</sup> In the terms proposed in *Chapters III* and *IV* the problematic of psychic individuation is an (erroneous) ontogenetic explanation of the dynamics of the phenomenological plane.

become clear why specta(c)torship—and more specifically, with respect to the technological networks that we are immersed in, net art<sup>(?)</sup> specta(c)torship—is a crucial moment in the process of individuation (and thus, why a theory of specta(c)torship is indispensable for a theory of individuation). One step further, it will be possible to formulate the specificity of net art<sup>(?)</sup> specta(c)torship by recalling the ways in which it functions with respect to the technological network.

### **V.1. Psychic Individuation and the Transindividual**

In the discussion of vital individuation, Simondon insists that *individuated being* is, properly speaking, *being* in the process of individuation, a result of individuation that is always changing by placing itself as a term in its own becoming: 'l'individu est ce qui a été individué et continue à s'individer' (Simondon [1958] 2013, 190).<sup>191</sup> In other words, the individual is the result of a recursive becoming which has this very result as one of its terms. Simondon will go so far as to say that there is no answer to the question 'what is an individual?'. There are no strict criteria that could define the individual, there is no individual as such. What is and can be thought of is only the process of individuation: 'En un mot qu'est-ce qu'un individu? À cette question, nous répondrons qu'on ne peut pas, en toute rigueur, parler d'individu, mais d'individuation' (Simondon [1958] 2013, 190).<sup>192</sup> The individual is not a being, but a process, an ongoing performance, there is individuation, not really individuals. The individual is the ill defined agent of this process of individuation by which itself exists and becomes manifest.

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<sup>191</sup> '[T]he individual is that which has been individuated and continues to individuate itself [s'individer]'. [my translation]

<sup>192</sup> 'In a word, what is an individual? To this question we respond that we cannot rigorously speak of the individual, but of individuation'. [my translation]



I am adding that the individuation process is not as objective as Simondon would have liked it to be, but dependent on a (necessarily erroneous) principle of identity harboured by the phenomenological plane (see *Chapter III*). This is not to reassert the primacy of the principle of identity over individuation, but to point out that they are relative with respect to each other. There is no individual proper, there is only individuation, but the individuation is shaped by the principle of identity that emerges only on the basis of the individual that it comes to subtend—a principle of identity that emerges upon the fiction of individuated being.

For Simondon, *psychic individuation* is a further individuation upon the vital ground, a further deferral of the solution to the problematic of the pre-individual field, a deferral that will result in the creation of a *subject* (or rather, a deferral that *is* the embodied thinking subject) (Simondon [1958] 2013, 29, 165-6). *Psychic individuation* emerges when the *living individual* is forced to discover itself as a problem, part of its own vital problematic. This problem conscious of itself is the embodied *subject*. The subject can be conceived, says Simondon, as a unity of the *individuated living being* with the *being* that represents its actions in the world as an element and dimension of this world (Simondon [1958] 2013, 29).

From an (erroneous) ontogenetic perspective (that always already presupposes a principle of identity), *becoming*, individuation—the dynamic of the associated milieu, the dynamic of the pre-individual problematic—leaves a trace: the physical individual. The living individual, is the being of this trace inasmuch as it traces itself, inasmuch as the tracing itself is fed back as a term in the process of its own becoming. Vital individuation is in this sense a recursive physical individuation. With the proliferation and dissemination of this recursive character of becoming, and, one step further, with the (recursive) capture of this recursivity itself as a term in the *becoming* that it drives, a *caesura* starts to emerge in the process of individuation between the individual and its associated

milieu. That is, the individual gradually emerges as a body in an environment composed of other bodies. This *caesura* amplifies the difference of the trace from itself (the 'arche-' inscribed as origin): it is a growing difference between different rhythms of individuation and different thicknesses of self-reference.

The *caesura* gradually growing in the being of the trace, the ever amplifying flow of the *différance* of the trace from itself (which, I claimed in the previous chapter, is nothing but the erratic movement of phenomenogenesis), is what eventually appears in experience (experience guided by the structure of the phenomenological plane) as one's own<sup>(?)</sup> body, as that particular region of the world where self and environment fold into each other and are at the same time separated. When one's<sup>(?)</sup> body becomes a problem in the problem of the world, the *caesura* (that the body is) gradually opens up as a question of practice, as a performance. The performance of the position of the gap between the self and the world (the practical definition of one's<sup>(?)</sup> body) is the seed that (dis)orients the entire associated milieu. The whole understanding of individuation happens in the meta-dimension of the 'cultural' archive always already oriented by this performance, while the performance itself (and the 'cultural' archive that it subtends and that subtends it), in its turn, is only one specific moment somewhere in this individuation process, and only happens against the ground that itself creates: the process of individuation. Individuals given in perception are these fictive (yet very real, if 'real' is understood as 'actual') constructions contingent on the striations of the phenomenological plane as these striations emerge in intensive processes of individuation (including psychic individuation), and one's own<sup>(?)</sup> body, one's own<sup>(?)</sup> physical being is (in the case of our phenomenological planes) the cornerstone of these constructions.

The *caesura* that makes possible the definition of something like an individual is not an absolute answer, but an erroneous, if necessary, *sense*—the (lack of) origin of *becoming* is the 'arche-', the

différance, inscribed as the absolute beginning. Furthermore, the subsequent dynamic of différance, the amplifying *caesura* in *being* that this dynamic creates, is contingent: there can be no criteria to define it a priori, it has to be constructed as an ongoing (erroneous) process of negotiating the associated milieu, as an erroneous dynamic of the phenomenological plane (albeit a dynamic that happens in the intimacy of the common)—i.e. this *caesura* is constructed in a paradoxical process of phenomenogenesis. The principle of identity (and at the same time its deconstruction, that is necessary for its very coming into being) emerges as an extrapolation of the *caesura* between individual and associated milieu (one's own(?) body) as a transcendental principle (aftermath of a mirror stage)—i.e. the 'a is a', 'a = a' emerges at the same time and intertwined with the embodied thinking individual, and is folded back into the ontogenetic origin (always already in the process of being deconstructed, in the process of being differed and deferred).

This emergence of a principle of identity (always in the process of being deconstructed from within) is integral to psychic individuation, to the (anarchival) event of the living individual discovering itself as a problem in the space of its own vital problematic (as part of the associated milieu and at the same time different from it).<sup>193</sup> But psychic individuation cannot happen in isolation at the interior of the living individual, because it exists by virtue of the charge of pre-individual problematic that the living individual, by itself, does not have access to: according to Simondon, the subject can be itself only in the individuation of the collective, because the pre-individual charge is heterogeneous with respect to the individuated living being (Simondon [1958] 2013, 248). In the terms that I propose, that would mean that the living being, by itself, would tend to have access only

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<sup>193</sup> One has to read 'event' in this context either outside chronological time, or if mapped onto the chronological time of ontogenesis, it is an event that takes eons of processes of vital individuation that slowly contour the being of the individual, first in negative and then as a positive occurrence in the associated milieu.

to intensive experience as afforded by the virtual structure of its phenomenological plane (i.e. in our case, the intensive world becoming Nature), and that without the transindividual collective this dynamic would tend to be foreclosed by the seeming absoluteness of its sense. That is, the phenomenological plane would remain stable for the living individual considered in itself (although strictly speaking there is no living individual in itself, and thus no completely stable phenomenological plane—i.e. to some extent the problematic of psychic individuation is inherent in all life). Through the transindividual relations of the collective the phenomenological plane becomes dynamic enough (because it is continuously negotiated in common, because it is striated by the continuous negotiation) to emerge as a problem recursively folded into the process of individuation. More exactly, what becomes conspicuous as a problem in the world is the trace (the consequence) of this dynamic of the phenomenological plane, the trace of the movement of phenomenogenesis (movement that remains as such outside experience). This problem is the *caesura* between self and world that emerges intensively as one's own<sup>(?)</sup> body—the *caesura* that accounts for the embodied self and for the world in the process of being canceled towards Nature.<sup>194</sup>

The access of the individual to its own pre-individual charge, in order to become a subject, happens through the being of the collective as formed by transindividual relations:<sup>195</sup> a being together of individuals by virtue of the remainder of pre-individual problematic that each of them carries (Simondon [1958] 2013, 166-7)—which is to say, a being together by virtue of the absolutely unbridgeable differences between the phenomenological planes (even when they are ontogenetically very similar to each other). Each individual is defined on the ground of a singular and uncommunicable phenomenological plane, that nonetheless is shaped in the collective; the pre-individual charge that remains outside of the reach of the individual considered by itself emerges

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<sup>194</sup> A process that is far from being limited to <strike>human</strike> beings.

<sup>195</sup> Transindividual relations are the inherent political aspect of 'cultural' archives.

for the individual as those dynamics of the intensive world which are not cancelled without remainder in Nature; the transindividual collective is a collective in which these heterogeneous remainders of world (results of the absolutely unbridgeable differences between phenomenological planes) are negotiated.

What makes possible the transindividual relations that characterize the being of the collective is something that is prior to the individuated being itself (namely, the world as field of intensities) and that conditions the very individuation of the individual. Unlike inter-individual relations—that are instituted between seemingly stable individuals and help maintain the illusion of their stability—the transindividual makes apparent the artificiality of the self-identity. It does not negate the individual (which, paradoxically, can emerge only as product of the psychic individuation afforded by the transindividual collective), but it reveals it as a fiction, as an operation with the kind of truth and falsity that any fiction has.

The transindividual relation 'est constituée par l'individu qui s'est mis en question, et non par la somme convergente des rapports interindividuels' (Simondon [1958] 2013, 273).<sup>196</sup> The transindividual relation depends, in other words, on keeping oneself open as a question. This movement away from oneself is the necessary prerequisite not only for the being of the transindividual collective, but also for psychic individuation. The disindividuating movement of putting oneself in question tears the individual apart from its stable image imposed by inter-individual relations, but it does not guarantee yet its access to the pre-individual charge that it harbours. Putting oneself in question, if it remains an interior movement for the individual and does not open itself towards being negotiated in the transindividual collective, ends up according to

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<sup>196</sup> The transindividual relation '[i]s constituted by the individual who called itself into question, and not by the convergent sum of inter-individual rapports'. [my translation]

Simondon in anxiety (Simondon [1958] 2013, 249-51).<sup>197</sup> That is, it leads to a blockage that catches the individual between the imperatives of the pre-individual problematic that it becomes conscious of and the impossibility of solutions to emerge in the individual itself. The transindividual relation is the only way, for Simondon, of opening oneself towards one's charge of pre-individual problematic in such a way that a further individuation is precipitated.

In light of the argument above, that means that the emergence of one's<sup>(?)</sup> body as the experiential trace of a *caesura* that is itself opened up in the process of psychic individuation (and that at the same time opens up this process), is a consequence of the transindividual being of the collective. A body is a collective event just as much as it is an individual one, or exactly inasmuch as it is an event of psychic individuation it is always already collective. Individual and world, and one's<sup>(?)</sup> body as the threshold between them, emerge in the intimacy of a pre-individual problematic.

One's<sup>(?)</sup> body emerges in the intimacy of the common, as a trace of the intimacy of the common. In the framework that I propose here, the intimacy of the common has to be extended beyond the ~~human~~ collective to all living and non-living individuals that are part of (and shape) one's associated milieu. The space of politics is the negotiation of worlds in their unbridgeable differences. Transindividuality, likewise, should not be read in an antropomorphic framework, it merely names this negotiation of the absolutely different. What is closer to the ~~human~~ though is the threshold where the principle of identity emerges in the world grounded in the abstraction of one's body as image (and the body is nothing but this process of becoming a self-contradictory image, an image that always already harbours the vectors of its deconstruction). In other words, what is closer to the ~~human~~ is the space of inter-individual relations that arrest the body in its image, in its form. Because the deconstruction is always already at work in the construction of the principle of identity, there is always the

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<sup>197</sup> For the problematic of anxiety in Simondon's philosophy see (Krtolica 2012).

potentiality of a vector of experience beyond identity towards the transindividual collective: (miso-sophic) thinking. This passage, through identity against identity, changes everything: it striates the phenomenological plane that is folded into the ontogenetic beginning.

The body is where the subject and the world fold onto themselves and into each other. The body is a floating signifier, it is the trace of the gap between self and world, that is, the trace in the world of the absolutely unknowable. The body is where and when the subject meets itself in the world that it subtends but against whose ground it is. Being a trace, the body is a sign, a very particular kind of sign, a signifier that absolutely lacks a signified, since it points towards the outside of (being and) signification, towards a gap, towards a *caesura* in being, towards a fictive lack that separates the individual from its milieu. Subsequently language and world, signification and *being* radiate intertwined from this intensive space of folding as an interplay of difference, both *différance* and *differan(t/c)iation* (the conjunction of phenomenogenetic and ontogenetic error). One's(?) body is an erroneous fictive identity that subtends as fictions and errors both the sense of the self (of the individual that one never quite is) and the sense of the world. 'Body' is the name for the *frame* (read *parergon*) of the world that frames it. The body is an error. The body is an error. It is a name that names that which cannot be named, it is a floating signifier pointing towards otherwise than being (beyond essence?). The body proper is that which 'body' fails to name, that which it fails to be, it is the failure of being and signification that grounds being and signification. And at the very moment when it overcomes this failure, it stops ~~being~~ a body, since it fails to fail, it fails to fall and it fails to deceive... that is, it fails to walk and it fails to think. The body shows the subject in hiding it, in covering it. Revealing, discovering, positive knowledge do not have access to the body since the being of the body is merely concealing that which *is not*, concealing the absolute otherness of the self and the absolute otherness of the *caesura* that defines the self and the world. The body points to the absolute otherness of the unknowable. When positively apprehending the body, when bringing

the body and that which it hides into the light, it stops being one's(?) body, the *caesura* between self and world is displaced, new bodies emerge. Absolutely unknowable. And with them other individuals and other worlds.

Can an individual become something radically different from itself? Inasmuch as I(?) ~~am~~ a body I(?) am necessarily in a crisis of identity opened towards radical otherness in a folding of psychic individuation against itself. Enclosing the body in its image is nothing but the violent interdiction to ~~be~~ and to think, which is at the same time the interdiction of the transindividual collective.

Returning to our discussion from the previous chapter, in this context, 'cultural' archives—this locus of (de)constructing the collective future by creating its memory—, inasmuch as they afford the crisis of thinking against thought, open towards the (im)possibility of precipitating the emergence of new directions of (psychic) individuation—that will coagulate into the past and future history of new kinds of embodied individuals. In other words, the embodied thinking subject, by definition, becomes radically other to itself (always only) on the background of the 'cultural' archive.

## **V.2. Technological Individuals**

Nature is the archive contoured in vital individuation as the coagulation of the associated milieu towards qualities and extensities, towards actualities consistent with themselves that will come to be objects and subjects. The intensive world and its cancelation towards Nature (i.e. its actualization) is necessarily singular and uncommunicable, as many worlds as there are individuals (which is to say, strictly speaking, none; or rather, a plurality of words that never quite are), because the world is nothing but the associated milieu. On the other hand, Nature tends towards being one and common, it is a vector towards homogeneity (although it never reaches homogeneity), Nature is nothing but the negotiation (always political) of this common answer to the plurality of worlds, the tendency towards the actualization of objects and subjects consistent with themselves. Yet objects and



subjects, and Nature itself, come to be only as Nature is re-covered retrospectively by the psychic individual as a particular 'cultural' archive. The passage between vital and psychic individuation requires an aberration, an absurd error in Nature (in the Nature that never was and never will be Nature except in the aftermath of this error) in order to emerge (in order to have always already emerged) and this error is technology. An error that cannot be separated from transindividual relations and the intimacy of the common.

The question of technology is for Simondon yet another aspect of the process of individuation. (

It is true that Simondon distinguishes between individuation and *individualization*, and that in the context of the technological object the term usually used tends to be individualization, yet I will not follow this distinction.

The concept of individualization appears in *L'Individuation*, in the discussion of psychic individuation, as 'l'individuation d'un être individué' ('the individuation of an individuated being'), a further stage of the process of individuation that happens upon the 'already individuated' living being (Simondon [1958] 2013, 260-261). For Simondon, it accounts for the separation of the homogenous psychosomatic functions of the living individual into two separate domains: one psychological, the other physiological—thinking and bodies. Simondon contends that in this new and more restricted individuation (the process of individualization) the distinction of psychological and somatic domains is a new doubling that mirrors that between the individual and its associated milieu: thinking is like the individual of the individual, and the body is the associated milieu of thinking (Simondon [1958] 2013, 260-261). Against Simondon at this point, I cannot agree that the living individual (which would include 'the animal') has a homogenous psychosomatic dimension; this homogeneity would mean that for the living individual all thought is immediate response to its

environment (in view of survival), while the psychic individual (the ~~human~~) would have access to the environment beyond utility, a distinction which is obviously problematic. In fact, Simondon himself, does not consistently uphold this distinction.<sup>198</sup> Moreover, inasmuch as I am reluctant to accept the assumption of an 'already individuated being'—see above the motives —, the distinction between individuation and individualization becomes even more problematic. In the framework proposed in this text, psychic individuation continues the process of vital individuation in all its generality (instead of being a more restricted process that happens at the interior of the living individual). It is not that the body becomes the associated milieu of thinking as a doubling that happens upon the 'already individuated' living individual, but that the body (the vital individual) is discovered *as a problem* upon the problematic that the associated milieu is (and in fact as the very centre of this problematic) exactly because the vital individuation is never accomplished, exactly because there is no 'already individuated' living individual. Thinking names this folding of the associated milieu of the living being against itself (the question of thinking is a question concerning the thickness of recursivity of individuation). It is for these reasons that I prefer to avoid the concept of individualization both in the case of psychic individuation and in that of technological individuation.

) As in the case of the physical and living individuals, again, the individual technological object, strictly speaking, is not this or that object perceived here and now, but its genesis and becoming.

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<sup>198</sup> For other perspectives on the relationship between 'animal' and ~~human~~ that emerge in the work of Simondon see Jean-Yves Chateau's 'Présentation' to the publication of Simondon's *Deux Leçons sur l'Animal et l'Homme* (2004). Also, from another angle, for a critique of theorizing the distinction between 'animal' and ~~human~~ in terms of accessing the environment beyond utility (beyond the instincts linked to survival) see Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am* (Derrida 2008, especially 159-160).

The technological object is a unity of *becoming*, and its genesis is part of its *being* (Simondon [1958] 1989, 20).

The *becoming* of the technological object is a functional convergence from an abstract level—where disparate elements exist in relation to each other—, through the discovery of functional synergies, towards a more and more concrete level—where the technological object tends to become a system coherent with itself, unified, in which the parts are modeled by their multi-folded contribution to the whole (Simondon [1958] 1989, 23). This process of concretization makes the technological object something in between scientific representation and natural object. The abstract technological object is initially the material expression of an ensemble of scientific notions and principles, says Simondon (Simondon [1958] 1989, 46). Its separate parts are brought together because their consequences converge towards a desired result. The concrete technological object (the evolved technological object) tends towards internal cohesion and towards a closure of the system of causes and effects that describe its functioning and thus is also more and more independent of the ~~human~~ being (Simondon [1958] 1989, 46). But, for Simondon, the technological object in contrast with the living individual is never entirely concrete, it does not reach the internal coherence that the living individual has (Simondon [1958] 1989, 46-47). In Simondon's account, the subsistence and evolution of the technological object always depend, more or less, on the ~~human~~ being. And it is this dependence on the ~~human~~ that makes the technological object artificial, and an abstract technological object more so than a concrete one (Simondon [1958] 1989, 46-47).

This dependence of the technological object on the ~~human~~ individual comes from the fact that the technological object is entirely actual, and it lacks access to virtuality (Simondon [1958] 1989, 144). As such, the technological object does not have access by itself to the virtual

plane that structures its intensive associated milieu and in order to function and to evolve it needs the ~~human~~ individual as a *transducer* (Simondon [1958] 1989, 144) that actualizes the diagrammatic space of potentiality 'incarnated' (to use Deleuze's term) by the intensive pre-individual problematic. In other words, the technological object in itself lacks information. This is one of the main reasons why technology cannot be for Simondon an other of the ~~human~~, but on the contrary it is intimately intertwined with the ~~human~~ individual. The technological object is still ~~human~~: 'l'objet technique qui sort de l'invention technique emporte avec lui quelque chose de l'etre qui l'a produit [...]; il y a de la nature humaine dans l'etre technique' (Simondon [1958] 1989, 248).<sup>199</sup> The opposition between 'culture' and technology, between ~~human~~ and machine, is unreasonable, being based on two contradictory attitudes towards the technological object (both of them false): on the one hand the technological object is regarded as a purely physical assemblage of matter, dead matter that has a utility, but nothing more; on the other hand it is presented as animated by a hostility towards ~~human~~ beings (Simondon [1958] 1989, 9-11). Simondon claims that this biased understanding of technics and technology conceals behind a facile humanism the complex problematic of technological objects as mediators between ~~human~~ and 'nature' (Simondon [1958] 1989, 9)—where Simondon's 'nature' should be understood, in the terms preferred in this text, as world, as world canceling itself towards Nature.

In non-industrial societies, says Simondon, it is hard to speak of technological individuals as such, and there is rather a question of divergent tools used by ~~human~~ individuals. The ~~human~~ individual is functionally employed as a support for technological individuality, the process of learning to use a set of tools being a technological individuation of the

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<sup>199</sup> '[T]he technological object that results from technological invention carries with it something from the being that produced it [...]; there is human nature in the technical being'. [my translation]

~~human~~ (Simondon [1958] 1989, 77). The ~~human~~ individual assures through its own<sup>(?)</sup> body the auto-regulation of the technological complex to its task, and has as such the function of a technological individual (Simondon [1958] 1989, 77-78). The process of concretization, the *becoming* of the technological object by which it comes to be more and more self sufficient and by which the disparate tools are step by step integrated into a unified technological individual, mirrors a retreat of the ~~human~~ individual from the technological individual. But the concretization is, for Simondon, never complete and, likewise, the ~~human~~ body always retains a remainder of its technological function. The ~~human~~ continues to be in a sense a technological individual inasmuch as it acts in the world (canceling itself towards Nature) through the machine (the machine which is the technological individual proper) (Simondon [1958] 1989, 79), but its function is now displaced at a new level. As Simondon puts it, the ~~human~~ is the organizer of a society of technological objects; the technological objects need the ~~human~~ in the same way that musicians need a conductor (Simondon [1958] 1989, 11).<sup>200</sup> So the ~~human~~ ends up being with respect to technological individuals something like a conductor (and both the musical and the technological meaning of the word are relevant) and something like a transducer, while the technological individuals in their turn are mediators between ~~human~~ and world: 'la mediation entre l'homme et le monde s'objective en objet technique comme elle se

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<sup>200</sup> It is clear that the point of this example for Simondon is to underline the organizing function of the ~~human~~ with respect to machines, and not to conflate the being of ~~human~~ individuals and technological individuals. The point is not that musicians are like technological objects and neither that technological objects are like musicians. ~~Human~~ individuals and technological objects are not reducible to each other for Simondon, even if they are intertwined in their becoming and dependent on one-another for their very being and becoming.

subjective en mediateur religieux' (Simondon [1958] 1989, 168).<sup>201</sup> In the light of *L'Individuation* that would mean that the technological object should be seen as a mediator between the psychic individual, which always already supposes a transindividual collective, and its associated milieu—its charge of pre-individual problematic. In the reading that I propose, that would place the technological object in the very *caesura* between the living individual and its world that was identified above as the *being* of one's(?) body.

The problem with Simondon's account of technological individuals in *Du Mode D'existence Des Objects Techniques* (Simondon [1958] 1989) is that this conception of technology relies on the presupposition of an individual that does not exist as such—the ~~human~~ individual.<sup>202</sup> I tried to show above that psychic individuation presupposes that the very becoming of the living individual (upon which it happens) is kept open as an unanswered question. Psychic individuation, and the transindividual becoming that shapes it, supposes the unmaking of the vital individual, the un-making and un-knowing of the body, the (de)construction of one's own(?) body. Inasmuch as the individual is in a process of psychic individuation it cannot support the label ~~human~~, the only attribute that it can take is really just a question mark. As for the technological object, inasmuch as it mediates between the individual and its associated milieu (intensive world canceling itself towards Nature), between the individual and its charge of pre-

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<sup>201</sup> '[T]he mediation between the human and the world is objectified in the technological individual, as it is subjectified in the religious mediator'. [my translation]

<sup>202</sup> The problematic of technology is for Simondon that of the mediation between the ~~human~~ embodied subject and its world, yet what is obviated is fact that the ~~human~~ subject and its world are nothing but a process of individuation in progress, and that the very definition of the ~~human~~ is at stake in this process. Bernard Stiegler's philosophy of technology, that I will address below, has the merit of unpacking much further this problematic relation between the ~~human~~ and technology.

individual problematic, it participates in the becoming of the individual, in the continuous individuation process that takes the individual out of itself and towards the unknowable other. And this mediation operates in the gap between the individual and the world, in the *caesura* that emerges in experience as the figure of one's own(?) body. A body, at least the kind of body that we ourselves are or have, cannot be defined separated from technology. Technology happens in the space that one's(?) body is, in the space opened up in the becoming of *being* (which is the becoming of the trace, the becoming of the sign, of signification) between the self and the world, the space that makes world and self possible as errors or fictions.

Technological individuality, initially a function of the living individual, becomes gradually separated from it and externalized or expressed in the world as technological individuals.

Technological individuality emerges from the intuition of a gap between the self and the world, which is to say, emerges when the self stops being coextensive with the world and starts to gain a contour—a body. The first instances of technological individuality are the actions of one's own(?) body in the world (dance?), and are conditioned by the apparition of this very body in the world by virtue of a separation between the self and the world. The process of psychic individuation supposes the questioning of the *caesura* between self and world (in the intimacy of the common), the questioning of one's(?) body—and with it the questioning of the self and of the world against the question of the body that in its turn is asked against the problematic that the world always already is—and it is intimately related with the externalization of technological individuality in the form of technological individuals. Once technological individuality (a mediation between the living individual and its associated milieu) emerges in the world in the form of the technological individual, it introduces on the phenomenological plane the problem of a difference of the body from itself (in Deleuze's vocabulary one could say, more exactly, that the technological individual introduces in the world a trace of the dramatization of the body, the differentiation of the

differentiation that actualizes the body). The body externalizes its function of technological individuality liberating itself from it (to some extent). The technological individual is the trace in the world of the process of bridging the gap between the individual and its associated milieu, and at the same time, the trace of the relativity of that gap (which again, appears in experience as the body itself). A gap that is displaced by the very existence of this trace and its recursive proliferation (its inclusion in the pre-individual problematic that the living individual has to solve), and yet a gap that is defined (gains its ~~human~~ contours) only with this displacement.<sup>203</sup> This externalization of technological individuality with respect to the living individual in the process of psychic individuation presupposes a sliding of the limit between the individual and the world, which means, it supposes a redefinition of the body of the living being caught in that individuation process, at the same time of the individual and of its world. (

Considering that the entirety of ontogenesis is dependent upon the phenomenological plane that is thus redefined, the question of 'originary technicity', an essential problematic of the process of individuation with respect to technology, comes to be framed from a new angle. If everything is always already technological—depending on the dynamics of the archi-trace as Derrida proposes (Derrida 1967, 90-91), and as Stiegler reiterates and explains in a more straight forward manner (Stiegler 1998)—this is because technology is inherent in the emergence of the phenomenological plane that grounds the ontogenetic dynamic. Arthur Bradley is right to claim that attempts at formulating originary technicity from Marx to Derrida end up reincorporating the anthropos that they aim to deconstruct, albeit in an aporetic dynamic that is continuously challenging its very products (Bradley 2011, 161-164), but this is not an inconvenient of the theory, as Bradley suggests, but rather its very ground. The (de)construction of the ~~human~~ body is inherent to the phenomenological plane that is contoured in this (de)constructive dynamic and which in its turn

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<sup>203</sup> See the reading of Stiegler's theory of technology below.



grounds the ontogenetic process in which this (de)construction comes to happen. Derrida, in *Of Grammatology*, is very clear regarding this folding (Derrida 1967, 34-41). Bradley's critique does not take into account the fact that Derrida's archi-trace (and archi-writing) does not simply constitute an absolute general origin for a linear history, but rather an originary lack of origin<sup>204</sup>—an origin grounded in the very history that originates in it.<sup>205</sup> Bradley suggests that in order to think originary technicity we should attempt to go beyond the concepts of technics and technology, rather than trying to go beyond the figure of the <strike>human</strike> (Bradley 2011, 163-164). My point here, in line with the philosophical thread that Bradley attempts to criticize, is that quite on the contrary, we have to think through a feedback-loop in which the body in its intertwining with technology constitutes an essential conjunction between the ontogenetic and phenomenogenetic

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<sup>204</sup> “La trace n'est pas seulement la disparition de l'origine, elle veut dire ici—dans le discours que nous tenons et selon le parcours que nous suivons—que l'origine n'a même pas disparu, qu'elle n'a jamais été constituée qu'en retour par une non-origine, la trace, qui devient ainsi l'origine de l'origine.” (Derrida 1967, 90). Translated in English by Spivak as follows: “The trace is not only the disappearance of origin—within the discourse that we sustain and according to the path that we follow it means that the origin did not even disappear, that it was never constituted except reciprocally by a nonorigin, the trace, which thus becomes the origin of the origin.” (Derrida 1997, 61)

<sup>205</sup> In the discussion on the pages 49-50 Bradley (2011) insists that Derrida's (and Freud's) originary technicity is grounded in a historically contingent situation (the analysis of the writing pad), but misses the fact that the main point of *Of Grammatology* is exactly to theorize and deconstruct this folding of a specific historical conception of writing as the originary lack of origin of ontology and of the ontogenetic dynamic. For Derrida, the origin is not an a-historical general beginning as Bradley makes it look, but rather the origin of history grounded in the contingency of the very history that originates in it. Spivak in the *Translator's Preface* to the English translation of the text specifically warns against such mistaken interpretations of Derrida (and Heidegger for that matter)—see (Spivak 1997, xvii-xviii). *Of Grammatology* proposes a very fertile feedback loop that is further explored and theorized with respect to technics and technology by Bernard Stiegler (technology as the default of origin) and Yuk Hui (cosmotechnics as multiplicity of Natures rather than multiplicity of points of view upon one and the same Nature).

dimensions of individuation and operates as an originary lack of origin always already technological, which is continuously (de)constructed and glitched. Thinking this (de)construction of the body in its inherent technicity, cannot be avoided if we are to understand the relationship between embodied subjectivity, technology and the world. The fact that the bodies which we thus theorize are mere glitches of the <strike>human</strike> figure, rather than going beyond it strictly speaking, is not an argument against the (de)construction of the <strike>human</strike> in theory and practice, but rather an indicator of its necessity.

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In conclusion, then, thinking the body (and the world in its canceling towards Nature) can only be attempted by starting from its intertwined becoming with technology, and likewise, thinking technology is always already thinking one's own<sup>(?)</sup> body. If we are to ask the question of the being, becoming and meaning of our bodies, the question of the embodied thinking subject, it has to be asked towards the technologies which inform its being, becoming and meaning.

### **V.3. Intelligent Bodies**

Bernard Stiegler points out (in a framework inspired by Simondon's philosophy) that the problem of technology, from the first flakes of flint all the way to computing machines, should be formulated in the context of a primordial coupling of the subject and the object, of the *who* and the *what* (Stiegler 1998, 134-42). This coupling, far from being a characteristic of 'new media', was always an integral part of the beings that we are, throughout their history. In terms borrowed from Greek mythology, the emergence of the <strike>human</strike>, Stiegler contends, is the aftermath of an original fault [le défaut d'origine], the ongoing result of the fault of Epimetheus (Stiegler 1998, 16-7). According to the version of the ancient Greek myth of Prometheus that Stiegler analyzes, while distributing the qualities among all the living beings Epimetheus forgets about the

~~human~~. Prometheus, his brother, steals the fire from the gods, offers *teknē* as prostheses to the ~~human~~ (in the vocabulary proposed here, the promethean moment is the gift of the  that makes the 'human' possible), in order to compensate (with a second fault) for the fault of Epimetheus. The ~~human~~ is ~~human~~ only by being outside itself through its prostheses (Stiegler 1998, 193). The history of humankind will henceforth be the history of their tools (Stiegler 1998, 135). The answer to the question 'what is the "human"?' or 'what is a "human" body?' would have to be a techno-logy: a discourse on *technē*, a discourse on the forgotten *technē* (itself a figure of forgetfulness).

From an anthropological perspective, building especially on the writings of Leroi-Gourhan, Stiegler argues that there is no ~~human~~ properly speaking prior to its tools. The evolution of the ~~human~~ body towards its present configuration cannot be thought independent of technology: 'The movement inherent in this process of exteriorization is paradoxical: Leroi-Gourhan in fact says that it is the tool, that is, *tekhnē*, that invents the human, not the human who invents the technical. Or again: the human invents himself in the technical by inventing the tool—by becoming exteriorized techno-logically' (Stiegler 1998, 141). The slow technological progress shapes the becoming of the ~~human~~ just as much as the ~~human~~ shapes its tools. The flakes of flint made by proto-humans shape the possibilities of the becoming of their bodies. The evolution of the body towards its ~~human~~ stages is possible only with the tools that it uses. It is not at all that the ~~human~~ makes the tools, the tools are already there to make the ~~human~~, to witness its emergence. Thinking (at least the type of thinking that we perform, or that performs us) emerges in a being that is always already prosthetic. It cannot be a question of a ~~human~~ subject thinking without material

support. The thinking subject, the *who* that thinks, always does so on the basis of its prosthesis, in the space opened up by its prosthesis. There is no *who* that can think independently of the *what*.<sup>206</sup>

On the other hand, as pointed out previously, the *what*, be it a computing machine, or an artificial intelligence software, likewise, computes and thinks only by virtue of its relation to a *who*.

Thinking supposes having the intertwined becoming of one's embodied subjectivity and its associated milieu open as a problem. In order for a computing machine to think, to be intelligent (A.I.), to learn (deep learning), it would need first to have a world (intensive field) and then to lose it (cancel the intensive field towards representation, towards Nature), and then to fold this loss against itself (thinking against thought) in anarchival events that (dis)orient the very virtual structure that grounds the intensive dynamics of the world and its actualizations. Saying that computers have memory is a misleading metaphor, saying that an artificial intelligence thinks,

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<sup>206</sup> In order to avoid a too lengthy detour, I will have to refrain from following closely Stiegler's philosophical arguments in the first volume of *Technics and Time* (Stiegler 1998), formulated as a critique of Heidegger's existential analytic. Briefly put, Stiegler argues for the originary technicity (qua lack of origin) of the 'ex-' (ekstasis) of Heideggerian 'existence'.

likewise.<sup>207</sup> They do so only inasmuch as they are inseparable from a *who* that, for the moment, we (misreading ourselves as embodied ~~human~~ subjects) identify ourselves with. In order for computer memory to be memory, and for the series of actions done by a machine to be computing (and further: intelligence, learning), it needs us as its prostheses (at least for now), as the transducers that grant it access to the space of its own becoming (Simondon [1958] 1989, 143-5).

Concluding from this that artificial intelligence could never think and that computers could never compute is just another fallacy. There is something that is still lacking in order for the computer network to think independently of our bodies, and that is information—namely, its relation to the virtual, to the improbable, to the structure of potentiality that grounds the series of contingent presents. What the computer lacks is the horizon opened up by error and its fertility. For now, we

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<sup>207</sup> This goes to a certain extent against arguments that the theory of information could bridge the gap between organicist and mechanic conceptions of 'reality' and of thinking, such as the position formulated by Yuk Hui in *Recursivity and Contingency* (Hui 2019). (See also the discussion of information above.) In the perspective formulated here, computers and computer networks, as they function today, if considered separate from the ~~human~~, lack access to the problematic that drives their becoming: do not have access to information. Computer and computer networks might receive inputs from their environments and might answer to those inputs by performing actions that closely resemble those of living beings, nonetheless their associated milieu is predefined rather than negotiated as an open problematic. The problem is not only that of responding to unrecognizable stimuli (in the case of thinking: the *sentientum*), but also of allowing new types of stimuli to appear. I do not claim that this is impossible for digital networks, I claim that this is not the case yet with the technologies that we are using now. Nonetheless, the position formulated here comes surprisingly close to the framework outlined by Yuk Hui in *Recursivity and Contingency* (Hui 2019) inasmuch as it problematizes information beyond the figure of the ~~human~~, but also beyond a mechanic understanding of 'reality' and thinking. The significant difference is that in the case of our text the question of information cannot be asked towards the technological individual (or towards networks of technological individuals), but only towards the in-betweenness constituted by the embodied thinking subject (de)constructing itself. See below.

(in as far as we misread ourselves as embodied ~~human~~ subjects) are in the position of bridging this gap between the computer and its diagrammatic space of potentiality, the computer needs us in order to err, in order to be opened in its errancy to the figure of the insolvable labyrinth that life itself is. But it can very well be that a something (or someone?) else capable of performing this transductive function would emerge in a more or less distant future.

Artificial intelligence needs us in order to think, but we ourselves are nothing but artificial intelligence. Following Stiegler, thinking does not happen in ourselves, but inasmuch as we are with and through prostheses. Thus another side of the problem (just as complicated as the question of constructing a form of digital intelligence): the being of the *who* in the light of a *what* that is a computing machine capable of what we (wrongly) call computing and artificial intelligence. What is the being of the intelligent being in this case? What form of embodiment corresponds to this intelligence? If it is exact to say that the machine does not in fact compute, it is just as true that the ~~human~~ does not compute either. And it never did. Computing and thinking happen in-between the *who* and the *what*. And this is exactly why the very distinction of a *who* and a *what* is an error. A very fertile one, nonetheless an error. So, how to define the body that thinks? What is it? Who is it? What does it become towards? With Leroi-Gourhan, quoted in the second volume of Stiegler's *Technics and Time*, one could say that the human changes its species a little bit every time it changes tools and institutions (Stiegler 2009, 74).<sup>208</sup> Thus the problem of contemporary technology, of immense computing power, extended digital networks, and amazingly sophisticated A.I. not only as the question of another form of thinking but as the very problem of how we ourselves(?) think—the problem of the kind of thought and thinking that produces these very lines, the problem of the kind of thought and thinking that is instantiated in reading these lines. Who are we, this thought that says 'I' from in-between what would have been a ~~human~~

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<sup>208</sup> André Leroi-Gourhan, *Le Mémoire et les Rythmes* (Paris: Broché, 1975), quoted in (Stiegler 2009, 74).

subject and what would have been a computing device? What kind of embodiment does this thinking have? What kind of bodies do we have inasmuch as we think today?

There is a body that thinks when thought happens in-between what would have been a ~~human~~ body and what would have been a piece of paper. There is a body that thinks when thought happens in-between what would have been a ~~human~~ body and what would have been a computing machine. Are these two bodies the same? Certainly 'I' claim them to be. And certainly they are not. Katherine Hayles is right to argue that the signifier on the blank page does not function in the same way as the signifier on the screen (Hayles 1999, 29-30). For us, that also means that the thinking subject cannot be but different from itself just as the signifier is. An infinitesimal slippage between two bodies screaming the same yet different 'I', the 'I' that signifies from the surface the blank paper and the 'I' that signifies from the surface of the screen. A slippage that makes all the difference. To take the two 'I's for being the same means to forget the body that thinks, to forget that a ~~human~~ body cannot itself think. But, again, what is then the body that thinks, the body that thinking happens for, or through?

In the light of Simondon's theory of individuation and its further developments in Stiegler's philosophy, the commonsense understanding of our own<sup>(?)</sup> bodies as ~~human~~ proves to be rather misleading (and both Simondon and Stiegler choose at times to ignore this point). When I<sup>(?)</sup> say 'I', it is not my<sup>(?)</sup> body in its ~~human~~ limits that I<sup>(?)</sup> affirm, but rather (what would have been) this body together with (what would have been) its prostheses (thinking is always already a conjunction of the *who* and the *what*). Even more, the 'I' that thinks names the intertwined becoming of an embodied subject together with its associated milieu—together with its intensive environment (striated by the prostheses). The primary and proper referent of the 'I' is a whole world in its becoming, not a body enclosed by a skin. In order to account for the bodies that we take

ourselves to have or to be, we need to ask how and why a specific portion of this world comes to be designated as the proper referent of the 'I', we have to question the emergence of the *caesura* between the self and the associated milieu. I argued that it is this *caesura* that emerges in experience as one's<sup>(?)</sup> body, always already problematized by technology, and that the definition of this body has to remain fundamentally in question. Inasmuch as 'I' think it is a question that must stay open. Answers can emerge as errors, as *ex post facto* (mis)readings: 'it is a <strike>human</strike> body', 'it is an assemblage of <strike>human</strike> and non-human agents' whatever that means. Inasmuch as I<sup>(?)</sup> think, inasmuch as I<sup>(?)</sup> am in the process of psychic individuation, I<sup>(?)</sup> do not know who I<sup>(?)</sup> am. And 'I<sup>(?)</sup> do not know who I<sup>(?)</sup> am' not by myself as a self-referencing gesture, but as a public act in the intimacy of the common. 'I<sup>(?)</sup> do not know who I<sup>(?)</sup> am' opens as a double ontogenetic and phenomenogenetic problem striated by the 'cultural' archive (with its political aspects—the intimacy of the common; with its technological aspects—the inherent intertwining of the *who* and the *what*). An unsolvable problem.

Yet, thinking beyond the limits of the <strike>human</strike> body is far from opening a utopian space where 'everything is possible'. Thinking is the radical crisis of opening oneself to the unknown to the point of losing oneself in it. The danger in thinking is death, irremediably losing oneself. Thinking has to fail if the I<sup>(?)</sup> is to survive (when anarchival events proliferate to the point of anarchy, simply destroying the archives that ground individuation rather than (dis)orienting them, individuation eventually fails). The I<sup>(?)</sup> cannot survive if it does not open itself to thinking, yet it risks dying when it does so. The I<sup>(?)</sup> survives only inasmuch as thinking fails. One cannot stop thinking (failing). Thinking (failing) obsessively. Thinking traverses us, splits us open. Thinking is a pathology. To think is to err in the search for oneself as absolute other, and finding oneself, reaching the final result, means death. Thinking is the unmaking of one's<sup>(?)</sup> body, of the very body that tries (and fails) to open itself towards thinking. But the infinitesimal shifts that happen in this repeated



failure of becoming are seeds of events, infinitely small cracks that promise to tear down the whole system of representation based on ~~human~~ bodies, only to allow other erroneous fictions to emerge on its ruins. A return of the body, a return of some kind of subjectivity to arrest becoming, but not of the same body and not of the same subjectivity, the return of an improbable future.

But one does not think in general upon a blank slate. On the contrary, thinking happens always on a very specific background that is played against itself. The movements of thought are always opened up and oriented by the specific conditions of the (fictional) reasoning subject, which is to say by the technology thorough which the subject collapses into who they are, or more generally by the 'cultural' archives with their political and technological premises. That is why deconstructing particular instances of contemporary technology, with respect to their role in the formation of the contemporary embodied subject, is a necessary move, if we are to understand what it means to be an embodied ~~human~~ subject, and how thinking operates with respect to this subject (namely by (de)constructing it).

#### **V.4. Digital Objects**

There are intelligent bodies that emerge and fail (emerge inasmuch as they fail, and fail inasmuch as they emerge) screaming 'I'—and doubting it—from in-between what would have been a ~~human~~ subject and what would have been an object. And exactly because the question of such bodies is always already a technological question, exactly because the affordances of our contemporary technologies are deeply embedded in the kind of thinking that happens to us, our interaction with technology must be understood primarily as a practice of the (de)construction of the self. Technology is always also a technology of the self, an inherent part of the ground that subtends the emergence of thought against which the self comes to happen. The associated milieu,

mediated through technology, bears the mark of the affordances of the technological milieu.

Namely, the world appears as it does inasmuch as it is discovered and constructed through the technological individuals that mediate between a fictive self and a fictive world. What does this mean in the context of computing machines and online environments?

Yuk Hui in *On The Existence Of Digital Objects*, building on Heidegger, Simondon and Stiegler's understanding of technology, addresses 'digital objects' from a philosophical perspective grounded in phenomenological and ontological discourse. 'Digital objects' refers in this context to 'objects that take shape on a screen or hide in the back end of a computer program, composed of data and metadata regulated by structures or schemas' (Hui 2016, 1); online videos, images, text files, Facebook profiles, are among the examples that Hui uses to clarify this concept. Building on Simondon, digital objects are understood as processes of individuation, and thus as a dynamic relationality and not as things in themselves that could be separated from their historical becoming and their milieu (Hui 2016, 54-78).<sup>209</sup> The theoretical choices that ground the emergence and functioning of digital objects (theories of information, web ontologies, understating of objects in object oriented programming, and so on) are shown to rest upon specific readings of key debates in the history of philosophy, and thus specific philosophical choices appear from this perspective as intrinsic to what 'digital objects' are (Hui 2016, passim).

Building upon a theoretical schema prominent in the work of Bernard Stiegler, one of the main contentions of *On the Existence of Digital Objects* is that digital objects perform tertiary protentions that participate in the exercise of (what Kant calls) the transcendental imagination and risk transforming it into a passive synthesis inasmuch as the future becomes an algorithmic reenactment

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<sup>209</sup> Hui operates with a distinction between *individuation* and *individualization*, that this project is trying to avoid. See above.

of the present (Hui 2016, 244-5). In general lines, Stiegler's argument (building upon a reading of Husserl) proposes to distinguish between primary, secondary and tertiary retentions and protentions (Stiegler 2014). Primary retentions refer to the fact that the present instant retains within it the preceding instant. Primary retentions are the possibility of the passage of time, the possibility of the experience of time as flow of sensible intuition. Secondary retentions are memories of past experience and condition the selection of primary retentions. In other words, what is perceived as immediately present is already conditioned by past experiences and memory, there is an anticipation and a projection involved from the very basis of perception (Stiegler 2014, 8). The protentions are expectations that condition, and are conditioned by, the retentions. They are also divided into primary and secondary. The primary protentions, inscribed in primary retentions, are responsible for activating modalities such as contiguity, resemblance or causality (every primary retention, at its very core, is shaped by an expectation to be able to be inscribed in chains of contiguity, resemblance, causality and so on). Secondary protentions, that condition the way in which primary retentions are selected, are for Stiegler, either stereotypes (habits and volitions) or traumatypes (either repressed or expressed in symptoms and fantasies) (Stiegler 2014, 9). Tertiary retentions, technological objects, are woven from collective secondary retentions and become the support for

secondary retentions (Stiegler 2014, 9-10).<sup>210</sup> Upon this background Hui proposes that digital objects perform tertiary protentions inasmuch as they anticipate and shape the future behavior of the user (Hui 2016, 221-222). Facebook recommends friends before I know them, Google tells me where I want to go before I know it myself, and so on. This anticipatory power—and its consequences for the collective and for the being of the individual in the collective—is, for Hui, one of the main characteristics that distinguish digital objects from any prior technological object. With respect to the relation between the *who* and the *what*, the digital object is, for Hui, susceptible to open up new existential possibilities, new worlds (Hui 2016, 219), but at the same time it can foreclose the possibility of thinking and the being of the (transindividual) collective, suppressing any potential for change (Hui 2016, 244-247).

My claim is that the whole schema of retentions and protentions, in order to be properly understood, has to be seen in the context of the primordial coupling between the *who* and the *what* that Stiegler theorizes in *Technics and Time*. The primary, secondary and tertiary retentions and protentions are not something that can happen on the side of the subject and neither on the side of the object, but rather they can happen only for the fragile body that says 'I' from in-between what would have been

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<sup>210</sup> Stiegler's article goes on to argue that every noetic act involves a projection conditioned by tertiary retentions, and building on Derrida's concept of archi-writing or archi-trace (see Derrida 1967) he identifies this act of projection as an archi-cinema (a theory that complements and enriches Stiegler's contention that consciousness is inherently cinematic: a montage in a flux of images or perceptions). As a support that conditions the interplay of primary and secondary retentions and protentions, tertiary retentions are for Stiegler *pharmaka*, both poison and medicine, inasmuch as they can create or reinforce *stereotypes* or can open up *traumatypes* and provoke through a transindividual collective new forms of individuation. For a more extended analysis of retentions and protentions and of their relation to technics and technology see (Stiegler 2011). Stiegler's main argument is that the systematic industrialization of retentional devices creates an obstacle to the very individuation process of which consciousness consists (Stiegler 2011, 4). Yuk Hui's position that I discuss below, builds upon Stiegler's critique of the industrialization of memory.

the subject and what would have been the object. The misrecognition of the 'I' that thinks as an embodied ~~human~~ subject, and the subsequent illusion that attributes to fictitious objects a type of thinking similar to that of the fictitious embodied subject, lead to a misunderstanding of tertiary retentions and protentions: the non-teleological psychic individuation (that the interplay of memory and anticipation provokes) is misrepresented as a problem of probabilistic calculation. 'Without life there is no thinking being', writes Hui in the final chapter of *On the Existence of Digital Objects* (Hui 2016, 249). For us, (diverging from Hui's analysis) that means that the question of tertiary protentions can be asked only towards the unknowable body that emerges as a question mark in between what would have been a ~~human~~ body and what would have been technological objects (and digital objects).

Hui proposes a reconciliation between transcendental imagination and logic by introducing the concept of *tertiary protention* as an algorithmically shaped imagination afforded by the digital object (Hui 2016, 43, 221). While agreeing with Hui's contention that our<sup>(?)</sup> imagination is infused with algorithms, I insist that the tertiary protention and the imagination that they participate in, are not functions of the digital objects but of the unknowable embodied thinking subject always in the process of being (de)constructed. Which is to say, that the problematic of tertiary protentions is not that of Google prediction algorithms<sup>211</sup> (neither that of ~~human~~ subjects), but that of the relation to the pre-individual problematic that opens for the unknowable embodied thinking subject through the singularity that the digital object is. This problematic, as suggested earlier, revolves around the (de)construction of the body that thinks. Thus, Google algorithms, inasmuch as they foreclose the problematic of the body into an inertial ~~human~~ identity, also paradoxically impede tertiary protentions. The displacement of the problematic of tertiary

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<sup>211</sup> I am using here Yuk Hui's example (Hui 2016, 221-222).

protections from <strike>human</strike> subjects and their objects, to the ephemeral in-between of the body (de)constructing itself has far reaching consequences.

The orientations, predictions, provided by Google emerge from a logic of probabilities that neglects both the erroneous fiction that the <strike>human</strike> body is (reducing embodied thought to rational computation) and the erring of thought beyond its humanist frames, that is, thinking.

Google's prediction is not a tertiary protection, a tertiary protection is something particular to a thinking being in the process of psychic individuation (that inasmuch as it thinks never quite is 'itself', and never quite 'is'), and the thinking being is not limited to Google's algorithms although these algorithms are intrinsic to it. Retentions and protections can exist only for a being that opens itself towards the unimaginable limit of imagination (what Deleuze calls the *imaginandum*), a being which is not an embodied <strike>human</strike> subject and neither an algorithm.

I am not claiming that algorithmic predictions are not useful, quite the contrary, the point is that they are exactly that: useful, relevant. In other words, what is wrong with Google is that it is right. Its recommendations are not for me—for this body that says 'I' and that has no idea what it is and what it wants—but for the simplified and formalized data image that this body desires and (mis)recognizes as being 'itself' (yet there is always an unexplainable remainder to this (mis)recognition). The effect of taking Google recommendations for being tertiary protections is that the 'I' risks being enclosed in the system of probabilities, risks being enclosed in its own fictional image of itself. The embodied thinking subject risks being cemented in one of its possible errors and cut off from its own becoming. The misrepresentation of the thinking 'I' in the formal logic of the machine ends up automatizing the embodied 'I', creating it in the image of its own reflection in data as a 'digital object'.<sup>212</sup>

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<sup>212</sup> The same danger that is highlighted, albeit in significantly different terms, by Yuk Hui's analysis.

Digital objects, while not constituting tertiary protentions by themselves, do play a major role though in the tertiary protentions that we<sup>(?)</sup> perform. If the embodied (fictional) <strike>human</strike> subject, following Stiegler, is shaped in a mirroring game (a 'mirror proto-stage') with the flake of flint (Stiegler 1998, 141)—with the first tool that coagulates as an exteriorization that contours a <strike>human</strike> embodied interiority<sup>213</sup> —, then a different kind of embodied subjectivity comes to be at stake in this new type of recursive play of reflection made possible by digital technologies. And this is, on the one hand, merely a further reenforcement of the humanist fallacy, a further imposition of *common sense* and *good sense* frames (the figure of the <strike>human</strike>) upon improbable, intensive becomings yet, on the other hand, it constitutes a deconstruction of the <strike>human</strike> body.

In other words, in the terms that I propose, a tension exists between two contradictory movements. On the one hand, the possibility inherent in the digital object to open up fictions of the self and the world to their erratic becoming, away from their capture in the imposed stability of an anthropocentric world view centered on the figure of the <strike>human</strike> body. And on the other hand, a more and more violent structure of digital objects that arrest becoming even further

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<sup>213</sup> For the mirroring game between technology as primordial prostheses and the embodied subject we should quickly reread the relevant passage from Bernard Stiegler's *Technics and Time 1. The Fault of Epimetheus*: 'Différance is below and beyond the *who* and the *what*; it poses them together, a composition engendering the illusion of an opposition. The passage is a mirage: the passage of the cortex into flint, like a mirror proto-stage. This proto-mirage is the paradoxical and aporetic beginning of "exteriorization". It is accomplished between the Zinjanthropian and the Neanthropian, for hundreds of thousands of years in the course of which the work in flint begins, the meeting of matter whereby the cortex reflects itself. Reflecting itself, like a mirrored psyche, an archaeo- or paleontological mode of reflexivity, somber, buried, freeing itself slowly from the shadows like a statue out of a block of marble. The paradox is to have to speak of an exteriorization without a preceding interior: the interior is constituted in exteriorization'. (Stiegler 1998, 141)

than the humanist paradigm—although often in the name of some kind of humanism—in a system of reinforced identities that are coerced to conform to their own image in the system (to their data double) and to the strict formal logic of calculation.

Hui addresses this problem by advocating for an understanding of the posthuman as *pharmakon* (cure and poison at the same time) and argues both against a naive posthumanist position that would see the problem of technology as simply secondary to a 'good' posthuman ontology, and against the transhumanist position that uncritically celebrates the possibility of surpassing the limits of the ~~human~~ by means of technology. Hui agrees with the critique of anthropocentrism deployed by posthumanism, but contends that rather than leaving the figure of the ~~human~~ behind, a solution to the crisis of the 'fourth industrial revolution' (characterized by smart environment, robotics, artificial intelligence, genetic technologies etc.) can be provided by reconsidering the relation between the ~~human~~ and technological objects, beyond mere usage and functionality. Following Simondon, Hui sees the possibility to fight alienation, both the alienation of the ~~human~~ and of the technological individual, in the restructuring of the relation between two—hence the posthuman as a possible *pharmakon* (Hui 2020). The discussion of the (de)construction of the ~~human~~ body, that runs throughout this book, resonates with Hui's position, yet the essential difference is that in the framework developed here, the ~~human~~ is nothing but the alienation of an unknowable and unnamable thinking body through the expulsion of technology as exteriority. Thus the question cannot be that of a return to the figure of the ~~human~~, but rather that of thinking the unthinkable—the body that thinks—(and of failing to do so) through the perspective opened up by the obsolescence of the ~~human~~ that produces the 'human' coupled with the intensified violence of its imposition.



At the very core of the technology that has the capacity to decenter the current fiction of embodied ~~human~~ individuals and their world, a simplified and radicalized understanding of individuality comes to negate both the deterritorializing potentials of the digital milieu and the ~~human~~ individual that they are on the point of leaving behind. What remains is a reinforcement of some of the basic errors of humanism, further stripped of their inconsistencies towards the nightmare of an absolute truth: unchanging individuals encouraged and forced to conform to their image (their data double), and thought reduced to a simplified version of formal logic and the consequent imperative of utility and relevance that is supposed to govern all of our actions (What is the relevance of your project? How does it fit in the system? What does it bring to the field? As if both ideas and the bodies that think are unities identical to themselves that perform a function in a causal chain). What is lost? Thinking, erring, flânerie. The improbable mess of becoming will never happen in the antiseptic environment of sanctioned thought. ~~Human~~ thought, itself a restricting misreading of the intelligent body that opens itself towards thinking in thought, is further limited and cleansed so that it is possible to attribute a semblance of thinking to the technological individual.

Instead of challenging our received knowledge in the outrageous attempt to create a thinking being, or instead of opening ourselves up to the thinking made possible by digital objects, instead of questioning ourselves and our Nature in the light of this messy improbable body that says 'I' from outside of what could have been a ~~human~~ body, we try to create a thinking thing by reducing thinking to what the thing could do. Of course, it sells better. Every one of us desires, and is ready to consume, a satisfying simplified version of oneself, even if that means drowning in one's own image as it is projected in the digital milieu, in this simplified identity that we addictively desire (spectatorship).

The internet (as it functions today) is an archive of digital objects geared towards the reproduction of the identity that it intrinsically problematizes. The (de)construction of the user/consumer/prosumer through the manipulation of its data image reinforces an oversimplified version of the ~~human~~ embodied subject. Yet, inasmuch as these digital objects (themselves subtended by a principle of identity) function as singularities—inasmuch as the internet is a 'cultural' archive that striates the phenomenological plane and affords anarchival events which could open up the errors of phenomenogenesis—, embodied subjectivity opens as an unsolvable crisis, as an ever-widening crack at the very core of this absolute and oversimplified answer. Thus, the internet also as the condition of the possible opening of a process of individuation, grounded in the destabilization of the definition (of the limits) of the embodied subject, a process of individuation that inherently problematizes the principle of identity that it cannot surpass. We are immersed in this aporia inherent in the way that the internet functions today, inherent in the way we are thinking today. But the question is: under what conditions can digital objects afford anarchival events? Under what conditions can the internet be conducive to the errings of individuation, rather than to their canceling by the reinforcement of an obsolete embodied subjectivity?

## **V.5. Net Art(?) Specta(c)torship as Individuation**

We reach here a point where the main problems of our enquiry gained enough contour to allow us to finally ask: what does it mean to think specta(c)torship in net art(?) as a process of individuation?

The first section of this chapter (*V.1. Psychic Individuation and the Transindividual*) argued that the problematic of psychic individuation is always already intertwined with that of the transindividual collective. Let us observe that Simondon's discussion of the transindividual resonates with the reading of Nicolas Bourriaud's relational aesthetics proposed in *Chapter II* inasmuch as both

suppose a break with the inertial relations required by social institutions and propose a new relational dynamic. In this light, specta(c)torship is a push beyond inter-individual relations, that potentially opens the individual towards its pre-individual problematic provoking thus at the same time the becoming of the transindividual collective—the intimacy of the common—, and the errings of psychic individuation (which have consequences upon vital and physical individuation).

There might be more than a simple coincidence in the fact that Simondon's own explanation of the transindividual is actually built around an act of specta(c)torship (although not theorized by Simondon as such). In order to explain the emergence of transindividual relations and to distinguish them from inter-individual ones Simondon relies on (mis)reading a passage from Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*: Zarathustra is watching the tightrope walker; the fall (the failure, the error) of the performer and his subsequent death rupture the inter-individual social relations, provoking thus for Zarathustra—the spectator that does not turn their face away from the horror of the fall, of the error, of death—the disindividuation that will conduce, after a necessary solitary phase, to the possibility of the transindividual collective (Simondon [1958] 2013, 273-4).

Let us note that the death of the performer in the Zarathustra example is not just any death, it is a framed death, literally a death in a frame, a death on the stage, a death in the open space of problematized *aisthesis* (politically problematized sense-perception)—a death in a performative work of art(?) that opens up a (re)distribution of the sensible. The primordial ontogenetic question (the *becoming of being*, *being as becoming*, death) suddenly occurs in the space framed by the phenomenogenetic problematic (the genesis of the genesis of phenomena, the problematization of the phenomenological plane by anarchical events that restructure *aisthesis* understood as a politically negotiated distribution of the sensible), and their dynamic, in its turn, opens politics as an unanswerable question. It is not necessarily that all specta(c)torship starts with the problem of death

(as it is the case for Zarathustra watching the dying tight-rope walker)—although an argument might probably be made in a Heideggerian framework about the relation between art<sup>(?)</sup> and Dasein's being-towards-death—but rather that specta(c)torship is this space of problematized relations, that is at once a problematization of politics (of the transindividual collective, thus of the 'cultural' archive), of the phenomenological plane and, at the same time, of ontogenesis (the *becoming* of *being*, *being* as *becoming*, death). The Zarathustra example draws its value not from being a general model of specta(c)torship, but exactly from its exceptionality: it allows for a kind of instructive separation of these three domains that are usually intermingled and indistinct.

Hence specta(c)torship can be understood as the theatre of the (de)construction of the self,<sup>214</sup> the theatre of the errors of the self as a problematized ontogenetic/phenomenogenetic conjunction. Specta(c)torship means erring in the labyrinth of identity, in the labyrinth that opens as the infinitely long path between two infinitely close points, erring on the infinitely long path that (never quite) bridges the infinitely small distance between the embodied subject and itself<sup>215</sup>—and this erring is necessarily performed in the intimacy of the common (that is, in the space of politics).

Specta(c)torship has an ontogenetic function inasmuch as it problematizes embodied *being* (death) in that it requires the spectator to leave oneself<sup>(?)</sup> behind in erring towards oneself<sup>(?)</sup> as an absolute other—hence the active/passive Zhong Ziqi from the reading proposed in the *Introduction*.

Moreover, since the psychic and collective individuation, as discussed above, have consequences on the ongoing vital individuation of the living being, what is at stake in specta(c)torship is the very physical being and becoming of an (always fictive) individual. At the very same time,

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<sup>214</sup> (De)construction of the self because the problematization of the transindividual collective necessarily implies the problematization of the psychic individual (of the embodied thinking subject) that emerges and is, at the same time, disturbed in this dynamic.

<sup>215</sup> I am indebted here to the discussion of the figure of the labyrinth in Sebastian Grama, *Note Pentru O Fenomenologie A Eranței*, 50.

specta(c)torship has a phenomenogenetic function inasmuch as it problematizes the active/passive distribution of the sensible, and consequently it attends to anarchival events that provoke the genesis of genesis of phenomena, to the genesis of the framework in which phenomena can emerge (a genesis—phenomenogenesis—that remains outside of embodied experience, outside of aisthesis).

If thinking is triggered by the encounter with the *sentientum*, as Deleuze claims, specta(c)torship means deconstructing oneself in order to make space for the *sentientum* to happen, and more, in order to problematize the very emergence of the *sentientum*. As such, specta(c)torship names the embodied (re)search, turn and return, that gravitates around the moment of disjunction between thinking and thought, that is, around the disjunction between the usual dynamics of the 'cultural' archive (thought) and the dynamics of an erring flow of psychic individuation that happens upon and against the 'cultural' archive (thinking as a consequence of an anarchival event). The problematization of this moment of disjunction is also the destabilization of the embodied subject and of its phenomenological plane (that subtend the 'cultural' archive and are produced by it) towards the improbable errings of phenomenogenesis: the problematization of the emergence of the *sentientum* towards new types of *sentientum*.

Specta(c)torship problematizes exactly that point where the phenomenological plane emerges in ontogenesis: *aisthesis*, the (political) (re)distribution of the sensible (where 'problematizes' means differing and deferring the solution (turn and return), keeping the (re)distribution of the sensible as an open question folded against itself). If *aisthesis* is the process of sense-perception and of the (re)distribution of the sensible, phenomenogenesis is the emergence of ways in which the phenomena emerge and becomes sensible—the emergence of new types of intensities and of new dynamics of the intensive fields. Phenomenogenesis (erroneously) emerges ontogenetically as the

constitution of a new phenomenological plane which grounds new types of embodied experience, and specta(c)torship means attending to this constitutive process, lingering in the space of anarchival events that (dis)orient the dynamic of the sensible, differing and deferring any stable solution. The 'new' of the phenomenological plane, while being 'new' in the Deleuzian sense outlined above, is nothing but an infinitesimal disturbance of a 'previous' phenomenological plane and of its dynamic, that is to say: ontogenetically, phenomenogenesis is nothing but the emergence of an abnormal glitch in *aisthesis* (an abnormal, new, (re)distribution and (dis)orientation of the sensible in which new types of sensible encounters emerge). Which is to come back, from a different angle, to our previous claim that one's body, the intensive ground of *aisthesis* that is contoured by the very distribution of the sensible that it supports, is the aesthetic trace of the movement of phenomenogenesis,<sup>216</sup> and that specta(c)torship means problematizing the trace of phenomenogenesis (one's body) as an erroneous conjunction between ontogenesis and phenomenogenesis.

What is at stake in specta(c)torship is oneself<sup>(?)</sup> as a living being individuating itself—a living being, in its materiality, facing the world and itself as a problem. Specta(c)torship is the dangerous process of losing oneself in flows of individuation, disturbing the institutionally reinforced requirements of self-identity and oneness. In this sense specta(c)torship means leaving oneself behind and becoming towards something else, losing oneself, letting go, only in order to build a fragile fiction, only in order to fail. Specta(c)torship as erring, *flânerie*, walking (falling, but also

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<sup>216</sup> Why? Because one's own body (the way in which the individual appears in its own world) emerges on the phenomenological plane (in the world) as the ontogenetic ground upon which the phenomenological plane rests, a ground that bears witness to the dynamic of the phenomenological plane. One's body is the phenomenological trace of the movement of phenomenogenesis.

thinking) away from oneself in perpetual search of a self never to be definitively found, or that is lost exactly inasmuch as it is found.

Here, the two opposing paradigms of specta(c)torship that respectively inform Rancière's *emancipated spectator* (specta(c)torship as problematization of *aisthesis*—understood in the strong meaning as problematization of sense-perception, problematization of the phenomenological given) and Boal's *spect-actor* (the spectator ready for meaningful gesture on the 'real' political stage) fold into one another and intertwine irreversibly as the conjunction of the phenomenogenetic and ontogenetic problematic. Any stabilization of this conjunction (ontogenetic, phenomenogenetic), any potential answer (always an embodied answer), will have to happen simultaneously on a political level (which is always also a technological level). Political action, the framing of the phenomenological plane, the archaeology of this framing,<sup>217</sup> and *being as becoming* will have to coagulate at the same time; and can do so only as temporary fictions, as errors, as failures.

Despite the extreme generality of the stakes of specta(c)torship (what is at stake is embodied thinking, and consequently, at least in our framework, the world), it always remains a situated process: a specific (de)construction of a specific type of embodied subjectivity. This text, as a trace of a process of specta(c)torship, remains a discourse that follows the disruptive affordances of encounters with specific digital objects (loosely referred to as net art(?) works). The specificity of the crisis of identity that opens in net art(?) specta(c)torship is that it constitutes a (de)construction of the <strike>human</strike> body, inasmuch as digital objects, as we saw, open up two contradictory movements: on the one hand, digital objects (as a consequence of the choices that ground their very emergence) tend to foreclose the disruptive potential of what Yuk Hui calls

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<sup>217</sup> The *media archaeology* discourses addressed above, Jussi Parrika's *Insect Media* (Parrika 2010) and Mathew Fuller's *Media Ecology* (Fuller 2005), operate in the space of this problematic.

*tertiary protentions* into a usefulness that reinforces the economic, political and social status quo, that is to say, that reinforces the established system of inter-individual relations based on an oversimplified image of the ~~human~~ and precludes the movements of psychic individuation; on the other hand, digital objects have the potentiality to destabilize the inter-individual relations and to precipitate psychic individuation in the intimacy of a transindividual collective (inasmuch as digital objects function as singularities), and thus to deconstruct the figure of the ~~human~~. In other words, digital objects intrinsically bear on the production and reproduction of a specific type of identity, the ~~human~~ body, yet at the very same time offer lines of flight away from this identity.<sup>218</sup>

The net art<sup>(?)</sup> projects discussed in this text playfully foreground and explore the limits of this aporia inherent in the lived experience subtended by digital objects. The processes of net art<sup>(?)</sup> specta(c)torship that they afford invite us to think (against thought) a problematization of ~~human~~ embodied subjectivity with respect to its associated milieu. The relevance of the problematic of net art<sup>(?)</sup> specta(c)torship resides in the degree to which digital objects, with their specific dynamic, are inherent to who we are today and to the (de)constructions that we perform. As the discourses concerned with the 'post-digital' or the 'post-internet' insist, the technological network is now ubiquitous, and we are all affected by it.<sup>219</sup> Even being offline passes through the logic of the internet inasmuch as the socio-economic-political structure is already shaped by the affordances of the digital network.

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<sup>218</sup> See also the discussion in *Chapter II* of the contemporary version of the panopticon, driven by the centripetal/centrifugal dynamic of 'flakes of identity', that forms and tears apart the ~~human~~ figure.

<sup>219</sup> See the *Introduction*.



Yet, there is something more to say about the consequences of net art<sup>(?)</sup> specta(c)torship, and it goes in a less intuitive direction. This (erroneous) ontogenetic emergence of the problematic (de)construction of the <strike>human</strike> embodied thinking subject (and of its co-constitutive relation to a principle of identity) in net art<sup>(?)</sup> specta(c)torship appears as an event that striates the phenomenological plane in its atemporality. That is, it appears as a problematic that inheres in the beginning (as lack of origin), a problematic that is always already there in all gestures of specta(c)torship and all thinking, a problematic that is always already there in the emergence of the embodied subject, in the emergence of the living cell, in the emergence of the crystal, in the emergence of matter. Hence the possibility, and in fact necessity of addressing these themes in a text concerned with net art<sup>(?)</sup> specta(c)torship.

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#### **V.6. Net Art<sup>(?)</sup> Specta(c)torship and Cosmotechnics—Parenthesis —**

The last section of this chapter will parenthetically address Yuk Hui's book *Art and Cosmotechnics* (Hui 2021). Mapping out the connections and differences between the main contentions of the present text and Hui's work will help foregrounding one step further some of the focal points of the theory of net art<sup>(?)</sup> specta(c)torship proposed here.

One of the main claims of *Art and Cosmotechnics* is that art<sup>(?)</sup> has the capacity to educate our sensibility and 'augment the senses' (Hui 2021, 62). Hui draws a distinction between: on the one hand, the 'augmentation of the senses' through technological means, which risks remaining oblivious to the complex processes of individuation that are at stake in the intertwining of embodied thinking and technology—thus falling into what Hui criticizes as 'the *negative organology* of current transhumanist discourse on human enhancement' (Hui 2021, 272); and on the other hand,

the 'augmentation of the senses' that is at stake in art<sup>(?)</sup>, which rather concerns the coagulation of different types of sense and sensibility (Hui 2021, 28-29, 62, 125). In the terminology that Hui proposes this would mean that art<sup>(?)</sup> has the capacity to participate in the coagulation of a different 'episteme'. Episteme, drawing on Foucault (see Foucault [1966] 2005) but taking the meaning of the concept in an unconventional direction, means in this context 'the sensible condition under which knowledge is produced, implying more precisely a collective aesthetic experience of an epoch and a locality (its cosmos)' (Hui 2021, 25). This basic capacity of art<sup>(?)</sup> to frame sensibility (and 'augment the senses') is a consequence of the intimate connection between art<sup>(?)</sup> and technology (Hui 2021, 28, 62, 188-9) which puts art in the position of having a cosmotechnical function.

Let us unpack this claim in more detail. Cosmotechnics is defined in Hui's work as a unification of cosmic order and moral order through technical activities (Hui 2016/2019, 19-20). From this perspective Nature<sup>220</sup> (the cosmos, the ordered world) and politics<sup>221</sup> are dependent on technics, while the order of technics is dependent on cosmology (which is to say, on a particular episteme, epistemology, logic etc. that are integral to a specific cosmos, to a specific Nature) and on politics (on the 'moral order'). In order to be able to think the relationship between technics and Nature beyond the opposition between mechanism and vitalism, Hui argues for integrating the concept of Nature in the concept of cosmotechnics (Hui 2019, §44). The main implication of this move is that it overturns the idea that the development and diversity of technical systems can be explained by the

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<sup>220</sup> The capitalization is mine, it helps pointing out the connection between Hui's theory and the framework that we developed in this text.

<sup>221</sup> What Yuk Hui names 'moral order', as an ontogenetic dimension, translates (approximately) in the vocabulary that I proposed in this text as a dimension of politics: a way of understanding, regulating and modifying the dynamic systems of power that drive the intimacy of the common (where 'the intimacy of the common' refers to the interrelation of all processes of individuation that come to be relevant for the being and becoming of an individual, beyond the <strike>human</strike> community).

relation between a community of <strike>human</strike> individuals and their natural surroundings: it is not anymore a question of a unique Nature and different cultures that respond to particular natural conditions creating thus diverse technical systems, but rather of a plurality of natural orders, a plurality of Natures that are always already integrated in specific cosmotechnics (Hui 2016/2019, 18-20, 49-50, 299), which is to say, Natures that are always already interrelated with specific political and technical systems.<sup>222</sup>

In this sense, in *The Question Concerning Technology in China* Hui argues on the one hand that traditional Chinese culture is subtended by and creates a different cosmotechnics compared with western modernity, and on the other hand that in order to surpass the crisis of modernity (which is underscored by the globalization of modern technology, which is the globalization of modern western cosmotechnics) it is necessary to develop a multiplicity of cosmotechnics. This cannot mean returning to an 'unspoiled' tradition—Hui underlines that such an attempt risks either remaining ineffective because it is detached from reality, or developing into right wing extremist ideologies (Hui 2016/2019, 42-43). The solution would rather be, for Hui, drawing on historical examples of different cosmotechnics (including the cosmotechnics of traditional China) to create frameworks for techno-diversity (and consequently for a plurality of diverse Natures), which means attempting to develop technologies and modes of thinking about technology that do not frame Nature as 'standing-reserve' (Hui 2016/2019, 3-7, 281-282, 289-290).<sup>223</sup> One of the essential aspects of this change would be creating technologies that trespass the imperative of usefulness inherent in modern western cosmotechnics.

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<sup>222</sup> This position is consistent with my contention that the phenomenological plane (the cancelation of the intensive world towards Nature), striated by 'cultural' archives (with their inherent political and technological aspects), is folded back into the ontogenetic origin.

<sup>223</sup> Hui engages with Heidegger's well known critique of modern technology, namely that its essence is 'enframing' Nature as 'standing-reserve' (Heidegger [1954] 1977).

In the reading that I propose, inflected by the understanding of art<sup>(?)</sup> and technology that was developed in the previous chapters, this is the essential point where art<sup>(?)</sup> comes in: folding technology beyond its usefulness, beyond the 'enframing' of Nature as 'standing-reserve', and affording a non-teleological process of individuation. Indeed Hui asks in *Art and Cosmotechnics*: '[i]s it possible to *reframe* the *enframing* (Gestell) with a new interpretation of art and technology?' (Hui 2021, 222). In *Art and Cosmotechnics* the examples that Hui analyses in search of hints towards the possibility of such *reframing* are the different cosmotechnic vectors at play in the history of western tragedy on the one hand and the history of *shanshui* painting on the other. While I remain skeptical of the privileged position that Hui offers tragedy and *shanshui* painting in western and eastern art<sup>(?)</sup> respectively, and of the problematic definition of locality based on an east/west duality more generally, nonetheless the understanding of art<sup>(?)</sup> proposed in *Art and Cosmotechnics* comes very close in its main theoretical points to the theory of specta(c)torship proposed in this thesis: what is at stake in art<sup>(?)</sup> is an expansion of sensibility that is closely interlinked with the question of technology and the (re)framing of Nature, and thus with the construction (deconstruction) and functioning of a specific regime of cosmotechnics.

Upon this background, the present text insists that what is always already at stake in cosmotechnics is the (de)construction of the embodied thinking subject, a (de)construction that has inherent technological and political dimension. While Hui recognizes this aspect under the problematic of the *posthuman* or the *inhuman*, it seems to me that it remains an invitation to further thought rather than a finalized theory of embodiment with respect to contemporary technology and art<sup>(?)</sup>. The present book is aimed exactly at further exploring this direction.

There are nonetheless several essential differences between this project and Hui's work. Where Hui talks about the 'augmentation of the senses' I offer the self contradictory concept of phenomenogenesis. The 'augmentation of the senses' can be understood in our case, in a Deleuzian vocabulary, as an opening towards the intensive fields, towards the *sentendum*, towards the unfathomable limit of sensibility, beyond that which can be recognized in sensibility, beyond that which could be consciously perceived. What is problematized in doing so, as we saw in the previous chapters, is the very movement of phenomenogenesis and its experiential trace, the embodied thinking subject. As such, the opening towards the *sentendum* constitutes an opening towards the erring of phenomenogenesis rather than an 'augmentation'. Inasmuch as there is a political and a technological aspect intrinsic to this movement, there cannot be any strict distinction between phenomenogenesis driven by technology and phenomenogenesis driven by art<sup>(?)</sup> (such as the distinction that Hui proposes between 'augmentation of the senses' driven by technology on the one hand and by art<sup>(?)</sup> on the other hand).<sup>224</sup>

In fact, the relationship between phenomenogenesis and technology and that between phenomenogenesis and art<sup>(?)</sup> are of different orders. First let us note, that the focus in this text is not the production of art<sup>(?)</sup>, but the process of specta(c)torship. As such, the claims of this project do not rely on the relationship between art<sup>(?)</sup> and technology in terms of production (this aspect is at stake only secondarily), but on that between specta(c)torship and phenomenogenesis. Technology and politics are aspects of the (de)construction of the embodied thinking subject (of the process of psychic individuation), which is nothing but the (de)construction of the experiential trace of

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<sup>224</sup> That being said, Yuk Hui's critique of transhumanist discourses that propose technological enhancement of the <strike>human</strike> body still stands, inasmuch as these discourses trap embodied thinking in the image of the <strike>human</strike> exactly when pretending to go beyond it. The attempt of technologically 'improving' the <strike>human</strike> reinforces the fallacies of humanism, instead of critically engaging with them.

phenomenogenesis. And this is the very process of (de)construction that recursively grounds the movement of phenomenogenesis as its ontogenetic ground. In other words, this is the process that grounds the construction of the phenomenological plane (which approximately maps on what Hui calls an episteme).<sup>225</sup> What happens in the process of specta(c)torship is that the phenomenological plane and its dynamic emergence (the episteme and its very coagulation) is folded against itself and problematized. And this folding, obviously, will have a technological and a political aspect.

With Hui (or at least with the understanding of *Art and Cosmotronics* that I proposed above), this means that art<sup>(?)</sup>, inasmuch as it affords a process of specta(c)torship, will involve a folding of technology against itself, beyond its usefulness (otherwise the embodied thinking subject remains trapped in its image, in its telos, and specta(c)torship is mere specta©torship). Nonetheless, this is not a normative claim about what art<sup>(?)</sup> practice should be or about how art<sup>(?)</sup> should relate with technology, but a contention about the process of specta(c)torship. Art<sup>(?)</sup> is that which affords

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<sup>225</sup> Yuk Hui's definition of the episteme is (let us remember): 'the sensible condition under which knowledge is produced, implying more precisely a collective aesthetic experience of an epoch and a locality (its cosmos)' (Hui 2021, 25). The episteme, then, defines the conditions of sensibility of a specific collective: 'what can be sensed and what cannot be sensed?', 'how does one senses?', 'how does one organize the givens of sensibility in a coherent experience?' etc. At the same time, the episteme is strictly interlinked with cosmotronics, that is, with the moral order and the technological system of a specific collectivity. This comes close to our argument that the phenomenological plane (the virtual structure that grounds the dynamics of intensive experience) is structured upon the background of 'cultural' archives with their political and technological aspects, and that the phenomenological plane is the unacknowledged origin for the world (the cosmos) in its totality. The essential difference remains, that while the episteme is defined as a collective experience, the phenomenological plane is singular, specific to what we come to understand as individuals, the phenomenological plane is defined at the intersection of different collectivities, but not as a collective denominator. Also, another important difference is that the understanding of the phenomenological plane proposed here is not confined to what we come to misunderstand as <strike>human</strike> bodies and experience.

specta(c)torship, but it can be defined only *a posteriori* if a process of specta(c)torship is to happen. Phenomenogenesis always has a technological (and a political aspect), phenomenogenesis drives and is driven by technics and technology. Art<sup>(?)</sup>, on the other hand, inasmuch as it affords a process of specta(c)torship is a problematization of the aftermath (traces) of phenomenogenesis.

In this context, net art<sup>(?)</sup> specta(c)torship is a problematization of the phenomenological plane and of the living body instantiated by a specific technological network that operates with digital objects. The modulation of experience (including the experience of one's own<sup>(?)</sup> body) by digital objects already triggers phenomenogenesis, and is driven by phenomenogenesis. Yet the movement of phenomenogenesis is foreclosed by the imposition of a specific image upon the bodies that thus emerge: the ~~human~~ embodied subject and its world canceled into Nature composed of objects identical with themselves. What net art<sup>(?)</sup> specta(c)torship does is to (de)construct both the ~~human~~ body and its world by differing and deferring the solutions to the problems that emerge on this new phenomenological plane, and in doing so it opens phenomenogenesis to its erring.

Which is to say, with respect to Hui's framework, that the path from a homogenizing globalized regime of cosmotechnics<sup>226</sup> towards a plurality of cosmotechnics necessarily passes through specta(c)torship, through a process that would allow the erring of phenomenogenesis and would attend to the consequences of this erring. In as much as the 'western cosmotechnics' in its current instantiation is subtended by, and at the same time produces, a technological network that operates

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<sup>226</sup> The claim that the globalization of 'western cosmotechnics' is homogenizing, does not amount to disregarding the disjunctive flows of the global cultural, political, economic, etc., landscapes as analyzed for example by Arjun Appadurai (Appadurai 1990). It is merely to recognize that these disjunctive flows are subtended (and often times directly provoked) by vectors towards homogeneity. The fact that the global is not (or not yet) entirely homogenous, does not mean that the danger of homogenization is inexistent.

with digital objects, net art<sup>(?)</sup> specta(c)torship as (de)construction of the embodied <strike>human</strike> subject that is produced, reproduced and torn apart by these objects, constitutes a necessary step towards such a pluralization of cosmotechnics.

The accent on the problematization of the imperative of utility inherent in 'western cosmotechnics', that permeated our discussion in this section, brings us back to the political question of activity/passivity marked by the (c) of specta(c)torship. Let us unpack this question (the question that we started with in the first pages of the text) in more detail in the last chapter of this book.

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## Chapter VI: Notes on/of Online Flânerie

The preceding chapters argued that the transductive movement of individuation is the perpetual event of leaving oneself behind, or, in other words, the perpetual becoming towards an always elusive other, which is one's(?) 'self'—except that it never 'is' and it will never come to be. What we call 'a body', 'one's(?) body', is the error that orients this search. The body, the threshold, the frame, is that which makes being and thought, matter and meaning, possible in the first place. But this body fails ~~being~~ one's(?) body at the very moment when it is grasped by thought. The body is constitutively unthinkable, because *thinking* means opening the body up as an unsolvable problem, unknowable because it is constitutively outside of the domain of knowledge. The only possible definition of one's(?) body is: the outside, the radical otherness, the fundamentally inaccessible, the perpetual problem, the question mark. One's(?) 'body' is the intensive experiential emergence of the trace of phenomenogenetic erring (which always remains outside the domain of experience). And it is one's(?) body inasmuch as it remains a question without answer.

Specta(c)torship is in the first instance a push that throws the body into the fall that it is, the disorienting, disindividuating moment constitutive of every individuation. If we agree with Deleuze that thinking (against thought) can happen only by virtue of an encounter with the *sentiendum* as the unrecognizable limit of sensibility, then specta(c)torship is the process of the problematization of the *sentiendum*, the problematization of the dynamic through which one comes to sense, the (de)construction and (dis)orientation of the conditions upon which a *sentiendum* can come to happen. And this problematization emerges only upon the background of the 'cultural' archive inasmuch as the embodied thinking subject leaves oneself(?) and the world behind (in the erring

quest for oneself<sup>(?)</sup>), to make space in oneself<sup>(?)</sup> for the event of the encounter to happen: for a world to happen. (See the figure of Zhong Ziqi in the first pages of this text).

The question is then, that of navigating the archive away from one's received identity, of allowing and attending to archival events that (dis)orient the archive. What kind of practice would put one in the position of losing oneself<sup>(?)</sup> in the archive, of opening oneself<sup>(?)</sup> up as an unsolved crisis beyond the parerga that contour a <strike>human</strike> body? Once again, we will get lost in this question following impulses inherent in the encounter with specific net art<sup>(?)</sup> works.

### **VI.1. *After Hours***

Claire Taylor in *Electronic Literature in Latin America: From Text to Hypertext*, following Espen J. Aarseth, warns the reader that the affordances of the internet are not inherently liberatory, and that the online space that we are 'navigating' is already colonized by corporate interests and neoliberal capitalist ideology to the point that seemingly emancipatory movements end up reinforcing the oppressive dominant ideology (Taylor 2019, 5-14). Taylor claims that the works of (Spanish language) electronic literature that *Electronic Literature in Latin America* closely examines are immersed in this online environment yet question it at the very same time. On the one hand these works turn a critical gaze towards their own functioning (Taylor calls this a metatextual play) and on the other hand they subvert and confront the technology that subtends them and some of the main narratives underpinning it (what Taylor frames as a critique of digital technologies).

Consequently these works manage to throw light on the convoluted spaces of power that shape and condition the online environment that they inhabit (Taylor 2019, 261-6). I would like to suggest that the way the spectator, the researcher, engages with the works—as instances of a larger 'cultural' archive—is not indifferent to their functioning. In other words, that the functioning of net art<sup>(?)</sup> works, just as that of the technologies that subtend them, depends on specific practices of reading,

on specific modalities of specta(c)torship. The archive is instantiated through the performative practices that it affords. In other words, the archive is instantiated through practices that actualize a diagrammatic space of potentialities in the process of negotiating one's own image around which the phenomenological plane comes to be organized. The pervious chapter proposed that net art<sup>(?)</sup> specta(c)torship is a process that could liberate one from the oppression of one's own image, in order to renegotiate it. The question is now: how is one to navigate the digital archive such that it invites this process of specta(c)torship? Is there anything at all that could be said about such a practice?

I will attempt to offer a speculative, fictional answer to these questions, by (mis)reading Tina Willgren's video work *After Hours* (2019), exhibited in the *User Preferences* pavilion, part of *The Wrong* biennale<sup>227</sup> and by engaging, parenthetically, with Pippin Barr's game *It is as if you were doing work* (2017).<sup>228</sup>

*User Preferences*, curated by Maria Cynkier, was one of the many online exhibitions that participated in the 4th edition of *The Wrong* (<https://biennale.thewrong.org>, November 2019 - March 2020), a decentralized art biennale that features thousands of online and offline digital art projects. The radical openness of this biennale (any curator or artist that consider their work fit for *The Wrong* can exhibit), dizzying size (more than 150 online exhibitions for 2019-2020 edition, some of them daily updated with new works), and extreme volatility (many of the exhibitions become unavailable after the four months of the biennale) make *The Wrong* one of the most

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<sup>227</sup> The work can now be accessed on the artist's website: <http://www.tinawillgren.com/index.php?/works/after-hours/>. The *User Preferences* pavilion is not online anymore.

<sup>228</sup> The work can be accessed at: <https://www.pippinbarr.com/games/2017/07/03/it-is-as-if-you-were-doing-work.html>.

intriguing phenomena in the contemporary art-world, but at the same time one of the most challenging to engage with from a theoretical perspective. It seems to me that *The Wrong* asks the researcher to respond in real time, to dance, as it were, to follow the impulses inherent in this conglomeration of works making gestures as fragile and short lived as the exhibitions themselves, leaving a trace that, from the moment of its emergence, is already deprecated and impossible to follow.<sup>229</sup> Here is such a tentative response, the traces of a process of specta(c)torship, performed against the colorful checkered dance floors of Tina Willgren's work *After Hours*.

Tina Willgren describes the work:

Inspired by the lagging dance floors of Second Life, I made the digital world of *After Hours* in a game engine, and captured the events of it with virtual cameras. It's a distorted discotheque, populated by fragmented avatars, unfinished 3D shapes, scattered body parts and pieces of clothing, set in motion. During *After Hours* we might see glitches from the virtual worlds on the verge of disappearing, new ones coming into being, and the dance of all the imperfections of the time span in between.<sup>230</sup>

Maybe it is time to mention again that I am not trying to 'explain' the art(?)work, to find its hidden meanings, and neither to reveal the artist's intentions, but on the contrary, to follow impulses generated by the encounter with the work. Dancing with it. Any gesture of specta(c)torship, exactly inasmuch as it is sincere, is necessarily a betrayal. And these pages, I claim, are nothing more (and

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<sup>229</sup> Some of the works can still be reached after the biennial in other online contexts (the websites of the artists, other exhibitions etc.), but the intensive aggregation of digital art(?) in the space of the biennial is lost, and with it something of what the works themselves were and how they functioned in this context.

<sup>230</sup> The description was available at: <https://www.user-preferences.com/after-hours>, currently the link is broken.

nothing less) than the imprinted trace of such a betrayal. If you are interested in what the work really is, or means, or what the artist wanted to do or express, then please follow the links and experience *After Hours* for yourself... If the links still lead anywhere... There is no shortcut to specta(c)torship. There is no way of optimizing specta(c)torship. Which brings us to our point of departure: specta(c)torship, the very process through which this trace emerges, is a process that avoids the logic of efficiency inasmuch as it lacks an aim, it lacks a telos that could orient it, an end that would allow a problematic of optimization to appear. Specta(c)torship, online specta(c)torship in our case, is an aimless wandering beyond (or before) the possibility of any effectiveness, an after hours wandering on the labyrinthine dance floor vaguely contoured by net art<sup>(?)</sup> practices. And if the question is 'who' performs this dance, 'who' is this trace pointing back towards, I am afraid that the answer would reveal something like the partial virtual bodies that dance in Tina Willgren's work. These are the kind of bodies that we have been following from the very beginning, dreading and hoping that we ourselves, the spectators, might just recognize ourselves in them: organs without bodies, bodies without organs.

I will stop first at the engagement with the themes of labour and entertainment in Willgren's *After Hours* which hints towards a possible collapse of the distinction between the two in a society that seems to conform more than ever to the logic of what Adorno and Horkheimer called 'the culture industry'. The title, *After Hours*, already points in this direction: prolonging the labour and its logic beyond its limits. But what are its limits? The other side of labour, after labour... Leisure? Yes, maybe, but not really. There is a certain ambiguity to leisure, it operates on the thin edge between refusal of labour and submission to a certain consumerist domain of 'fun'. In a society where the culture industry reinforces its premises both through labour and through play, and collapses the distinction between the two (

## VI.2. *It is as if you were doing work*—Parenthesis —<sup>231</sup>

Pippin Barr's *It is as if you were doing work* is a browser-based game that caricaturizes a work environment. After logging in with the 'work credentials', (any randomly typed username and password will do) the player is offered a retro-looking virtual desktop—much as those encountered on the office computers of the 90's—on which tasks, motivational prompts, and distractions pop-up mimicking in a humorous key the experience of an office worker. Sending emails, writing text documents, setting dates in a calendar, responding to multi-choice questions, are among the chores that the player has to complete in order to earn promotions in a meaningless and seemingly endless hierarchy, each successive level meaning solely an increase in the amount of 'work' to be done. At the same time, the user is also excluded from the 'work' that she/he is performing, since the questions already point to the answers that should be given, and the texts write themselves as long as random keys are pressed. Intellectual labour is stripped of its superfluous intellectual aspect and presented as the absurd, if nonetheless fun, game of feeding electrical impulses into a machine. Where machine stands for the office computer, but also for the larger technological network of which the personal computer is just a small part, and not least for the impersonal social machine that requires the futile labour to be performed and offers credit (including payment, but not only) for it.<sup>232</sup>

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<sup>231</sup> This subchapter was published under the title 'It Is As If You Were Doing Work—A (Mis)Reading' in *H2 Journal*, No.21, 2019. Available Open Access at: <http://hz-journal.org/n21/bacaran.html>. The present version contains small but significant changes with respect to the published article.

<sup>232</sup> Michele White, in her critique of discourses that see the internet (and the technology that subtends it and that it affords) as empowering without problematizing its effect on <strike>human</strike> bodies, describes the absurd, painful and often humiliating position that the <strike>human</strike> bodies of workers and spectators (which in White's definition includes the programmers) are placed in when they are no more than a part of the machine, a necessary source of input (White 2006, 183-187).

*'Hard work means working hard!'*<sup>233</sup>

In the *About* section, that can be accessed by the player inside the game, Pippin Barr points to the feeling of being useless and ineffective in a world where work is increasingly performed by autonomous machines, and invites the player to 'recapture an *appearance* of usefulness through traditional human-computer interaction' [my italics]. The gameplay makes it quite clear that the usefulness of labour was in the first place nothing more than an *appearance*, and, in consequence, that work—as represented in the game—is a futile and absurd self-referencing loop with no outer objective that could justify it. But then, of course, there seems to be an important difference between the experience of the spectator of an online art<sup>(?)</sup>work and that of a 'real' worker. There is a chasm between the rules underlying the social reality of labour and those that govern its caricatural representation in a witty online game. Or... Is there?

The line between caricature and 'reality' becomes quickly blurred if following Alice O'Connor's article on *It Is as if You Were Doing Work* (O'Connor 2017) we note the resemblance between Pippin Barr's game and what the title of a 2015 New York Times article refers to as 'fake jobs' (Alderman 2015). The NYT report presents (in a ludicrously exaggerated and spectacular manner) an insight into the life of unemployed people who, as a way of training for potential future jobs, end up working (sometimes for months) in virtual companies that simulate a real work environment. Their work is as real as it gets, but it has no outside reference, since the products they commercialize do not really exist, and neither does the money they manipulate. A striking similarity with the game discussed here, inasmuch as in both cases there is an attempt to simulate the experience of an office employee while detaching it from any 'real' economic context; at the same time, an intriguing example of simulations and simulacra that render the seemingly clear division between fiction and reality quite hazy. But the stakes are even higher than identifying the 'reality' of

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<sup>233</sup> All subtitles in this section are quotes from motivational prompts that appear in Pippin Barr's game.

'fake jobs' as a possible 'real world' reference point for a reading of *It Is as if You Were Doing Work*.

The problem is rather to what extent work in a 'real' environment is as 'fake' as the one performed by the gamer and the one of the trainee in virtual companies. Or, inversely, is the work one does as a spectator in *It Is as if You Were Doing Work*, and the one presupposed by the 'fake jobs' as 'true' and 'real' as that of any office worker?

At first sight, the question is rather far-fetched. But let's note, following Marx in the first chapter of *Capital*, that the (exchange) value of commodities—the factor that grounds capitalist economy—represents ~~human~~ labour 'pure and simple', ~~human~~ labour in general, average labour, in Marx's words: 'labour-power possessed in his bodily organism by every ordinary man, on the average, without being developed in any special way' (Marx [1867] 1976, 135). From this perspective, the three types of work involved in playing a game that simulates work, simulating work in a virtual company and doing 'real' work in a 'real' office are all susceptible to be reified as exchange value, as long as their products are present on the market as commodities. But, what are these products anyway? What is it that is produced in office work, the simulation of office work and its caricature? And do these products have anything in common?

For the moment, I will leave this question open, and observe from a slightly different angle that automated work is increasingly responsible for the production of commodities (no matter how abstract these commodities are in some sectors of the economic system), and that in consequence the labour performed by ~~human~~ bodies loses contact with what it is supposed to be its own representation in economy—the exchange value as a property of the commodity. If Marx is right to underline the connection between work time and exchange value, then at the point where work is increasingly detached from the ~~human~~ body, the economy is based on floating signifiers that do not lead back to anything, unless a ~~human~~ body is forced



into useless labour in order to provide the illusion of a signified, without which the whole system of signification (including the economic, political and social structure) threatens to collapse. Maybe that would also account in part for the apparent contradiction involved in the much debated condition of the high-speed society initiated by the industrial revolution: the fact that the acceleration of technology instead of offering more leisure time for <strike>human</strike> bodies, is actually correlated with an acceleration of the pace of life.<sup>234</sup> We have to produce more and more futile work in order to maintain the fundamental illusion of a linkage between <strike>human</strike> work time and (exchange) value. And if work is fun, all the better. In this light, the difference between simulating work and 'real' work tends to be effaced, since, in an increasingly automated world, <strike>human</strike> work in general is more and more just a way of feigning usefulness.

*'It's time for a well-deserved break!*

*Break time is over when the progress bar is full!'*

At the same time, in *It is as if you were doing work* labour is punctuated by distractions and breaks, to the point that labour and enjoyment—as represented in the game—cannot be told apart any longer; the game is thus operating what might be called a *mise-en-abîme* by (re)presenting that which itself is, and consequently opening an endless mirroring game. There is an uncanny proximity between playing and working pointed towards by the production of a game that simulates work that simulates games that resemble work... and it serves to further subvert not only the common supposition that there is an inherent usefulness of work but also the idea of a disruptive, liberatory character inherent in enjoyment and fun, that would resist the dull logic of (useless?) labour.

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<sup>234</sup> See in this sense (Wajcman 2016).

In a discussion that looks at gaming and programming (as instances that were supposed to represent fun and enjoyment on the one hand and labour on the other) Wendy Hui Kyong Chun and Andrew Lison underline the potentially dangerous aspects of fun, that they understand in relation to exploitation (Chun and Lison 2014, 176). They observe that fun tends to reinforce, consciously or unconsciously the 'right' way of doing things, and, playing with the etymology of the word, note that in a certain sense those who have fun are also being funned (Chun and Lison 2014, 175), i.e. exploited. The users 'in enjoying the object of their use, whether drugs, games, or software development environments',—and one could add here desktop environments for office work (as in *It Is as if You Were Doing Work*) and, arguably, even the plethora of machines of the different stages of the industrial revolution—'are, at the same time, themselves *used*' (Chun and Lison 2014, 187).

This situation recalls Adorno and Horkheimer's critique of fun and enjoyment in the *culture industry*. For Adorno and Horkheimer the culture industry prolongs the logic of capitalist labour in the superstructure of society so that all cultural creation bears the mark of the ideology inherent in the production process. The culture industry is characterized by the constant reproduction of the same thing under the guise of diversity (Horkheimer and Adorno [1947] 2002, 106), and in the last instance, what it does is to continually reinforce and reproduce the established social hierarchy. Entertainment and work share the same logic, and thus all aspects of life are subordinated to the same principles (Horkheimer and Adorno [1947] 2002, 100, 104). The individual itself becomes just a product of the culture industry, a pseudo-individual tolerated only as long as its identification with the generality is unquestioned (Horkheimer and Adorno [1947] 2002, 124-5). Thus, the culture industry creates a circle of manipulation and retroactive need by shaping the consumer as one of its products. From this perspective, *It Is as if You Were Doing Work*, with its two levels of confounding working and playing that mirror each other—the first being its very existence as a game that simulates work and the second the representation of the common logic of working and playing

inside the game—can be read as a literal rendering of the logic behind Adorno and Horkheimer's position. In other words, forcing the argument a bit, one could say that the game stands as a caricatural portrait not only of office work, but of the culture industry itself, and consequently, of the consumer that internalized its principles. Is it possible that in interacting with *It Is as if You Were Doing Work* the spectator encounters the forces that shape one's own(?) self as a pseudo-individual caught in the intertwined logic of labour and enjoyment—a logic that works as a tool in the service of an established social system or ideological program?

If this is the case, then, returning to the similitudes between playing *It Is as if You Were Doing Work*, having a 'fake job' and working in a 'real' office, what is every time at stake is producing oneself(?), fabricating one's own(?) body and consciousness in accordance with the rules that govern the ideology of the prevalent politico-economic system. With the possible difference that doing it inside a game that caricaturizes the whole process might create a critical distance, enough to observe it, not enough to break away from it.

*'Stay true to yourself!'*

Work, as *It Is as if You Were Doing Work* suggests (in the reading that I propose, at least), means feeding impulses into a machine in order to keep it running—in its instances as office computer, technological network, or larger social mechanism. Also, being deeply intertwined with fun and enjoyment, the logic of labour underlies the entirety of the socio-political field, producing the individual social actors in accordance with its rules. Placing oneself at a critical distance from the absurdity of futile labour (while nonetheless being in the midst of performing it), brings into focus the possibility that what is every time (re)produced and reinforced through work/enjoyment is not only the commodity, but the social system itself, and more than that, one's own(?) body and consciousness, one's own(?) self as part of that system. The player/worker in executing the work

performs a disjunction that runs inside her/his own<sup>(?)</sup> body, becoming at the same time user and used in rapport with the machine. As the user it is the ~~human~~ individual in control of its world (canceled as 'Nature'), as the used it is a disposable source of mechanical or electrical impulses. It is this opening in between the two that permits a quick glance at the artificiality of the process that produces the most immediate 'natural' given: one's own<sup>(?)</sup> body.

There is an aspect to the body, a certain detachment from its inertial humanist meanings, that both Marx and his later followers and critics tend to miss: the labour (at least since the industrial revolution) was never simply ~~human~~ labour. The agency involved in production streams from a complex of assemblages that cannot be neatly reduced to a ~~human~~ body. The interaction with the machine produces a body, is itself a body, that operates within temporal and spatial regimes different from those accessible to a ~~human~~ body. On the one hand, there is the ~~human~~-like body/consciousness—stipulated by the ideology inherent in the current social, political and economic systems—that appears somewhere at the periphery of the production process at the level of the interface with the machine as both user and used, and on the other, there is the extended body that performs the work, whose agency cannot be theorized in humanist terms. A rapidly expanding gap opens between the non-human character of labour (mistakenly considered to be ~~human~~) and our economic, political and social system built upon ~~human~~ labor (missing its non-human aspect) reified as exchange value. Hence, the stringent necessity for futile work in order to cover and conceal the breach.

From this angle, the user/player/worker is an appendix of the machine, providing the required impulses, in order to receive the frames, the *parerga*, that contour her/his own individuality (elements of the meta-narrative that produces a self). It is not that the ~~human~~ body through labour produces commodities, as Marx would have it, rather it is labour that produces

<strike>human</strike> bodies as commodities. Or, in terms closer to Bataille's, the  
<strike>human</strike> body should be understood in this sense as an excretion of the labour  
process.

It would seem that in some sense the condition of the modern <strike>human</strike> is, after all,  
that of Sisyphus. The <strike>human</strike> body/consciousness would be faced with its own  
dispersion as soon as it becomes disconnected from labour, as soon as it would stop working... or  
playing...

So, maybe it's a good idea to finish this parenthetical remark with a link instead of conclusions.

Pippin Barr's *Let's Play: Ancient Greek Punishment*.

<https://www.pippinbarr.com/2016/06/21/lets-play-ancient-greek-punishment-limited-edition/>

Select (S)isyphus and roll the boulder up the hill only to watch it roll back down, and then... do it  
again, and again, and again...

)

, to have fun is also to be funned. The relation between bodies, labour, and entertainment is a  
coercive one: labour and entertainment force the psychic individual into its social image, in  
Simondon's terms, they are mechanisms that reinforce inter-individual rapports and hinder the  
possibility of transindividual relations. Performing useless labour, after hours, is essential for  
maintaining the illusion that our(?) bodies are still <strike>human</strike>: we are funned into  
being <strike>human</strike>.

Paradoxically, both labour and leisure in order to have an active political meaning (namely, in order to function as an interruption that questions the received system of socio-political power relations) need either to be passive, or to go full speed towards nowhere (which in the end might be just the same thing): exhaustion, boredom. Idleness? Maybe. Inasmuch as 'idleness' hints towards laziness, inasmuch as it is an antonym for 'industry'. But it is not even that much about not working, it is about working wrongly, avoiding the rules, erring to the point of exhaustion while doing nothing.

And, in a way, this boring yet exhausting idleness describes quite adequately a certain practice of spectatorship—a practice of spectatorship that this text points towards by introducing the parenthetical 'c', which is supposed to stand for the strange passive hyper-activity of the 'act', 'action', 'acting' inherent in this specific practice.

### **VI.3. Flânerie—The (c) of Specta(c)torship**

A certain practice of specta(c)torship that, if we are to look back for historical examples, seems to have coagulated at one point around the figure of the flâneur. The modern flâneur, philosopher of frivolities, strolling aimlessly, deeply immersed in the socio-economic structure of the Parisian arcades, yet somewhat escaping it, somewhat gravitating at the border of the market and of its logics, at the borders of the society of vendors and consumers, patrons and workers (Benjamin 2006, 40-2). Stepping lightly, passing by, letting go, building an estranged familiarity with the city and with the self emerging against the background of the city. Not innocent by any means, as guilty as everyone else for the exploitive system, for the economic and political aberrations in which he/she is immersed, and for the catastrophes that were (/are) yet to come. Nonetheless, an aberration of the system, erring at its very core, a glitch, a fragile and absurd error recursively opened to itself as an unanswered question. The 'natural environment' of the flâneur is not only the shopping space of the Paris arcades, but also that of the art exhibitions, especially the Paris Salons, and it would be

interesting to read Baudelaire's accounts of the Salons of 1845, 1846, and 1859 as traces of *flânerie*. Here too, the *flâneur* as art critic finds itself in a strange position: deeply immersed, yet only passing through, engaging, confronting, yet letting go and barely touching the whirlwinds of an art-world on the turbulent threshold of modernity. A couple of letters that Baudelaire wrote to Felix Nadar<sup>235</sup> give a glimpse of this weird uneasiness. On 14 of May 1859 Baudelaire writes:

'Je suis vraiment fort en peine; avant de publier mes *Curiosités*, je fais encore quelques articles sur la peinture (les derniers); et j'écris maintenant un Salon, sans l'avoir vu. Mais *j'ai un livret*. Sauf la fatigue de deviner les tableaux, c'est une excellente méthode que je te recommande. On craint de trop louer et de trop blâmer; on en arrive ainsi à l'impartialité...' <sup>236</sup>

Is Baudelaire writing what will prove to be some of the most influential accounts of the mid nineteenth century Paris art-world without even seeing the art(?) works? Avoiding the exhibition that one writes about? That is an absolutely outrageous methodology! And it gets even better in a letter dated a couple of days later, 16 of May, to the same Felix Nadar:

'Quant au Salon, hélas! je t'ai un peu menti, mais si peu! J'ai fait une visite, une seul, consacrée à chercher les nouveautés, mais j'en ai trouvé bien peu, et pour tous les vieux

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<sup>235</sup> The same Felix Nadar who will rent his studio in 1874 to the organizers of the first impressionist exhibition.

<sup>236</sup> My translation: 'I am really in a difficult situation; before publishing my *Curiosités*, I am still working on a few articles on painting (the last ones); and I am writing now a Salon, without having seen it. But I have a booklet [*livret*]. Except for the trouble of guessing the paintings, it is an excellent method that I recommend to you. We are afraid of overpraising or over-criticizing; we arrive in this manner at impartiality...', (Baudelaire 1906, 206)

noms, ou les noms simplement connus, je me confie à ma vieille mémoire, excitée par le livret'.<sup>237</sup>

It is not about not doing work, it is about a compulsion to betray, to escape the mechanism of the machine, of the engine, to cheat. And yet to fail even at cheating. To do one's work the right way only because one fails to do it wrongly. To be uncomfortable and ashamed because you did everything right. To long for the error. It is from Baudelaire that one can learn what it means to be a spectator (by failing to do so... it goes almost without saying). It is from these fragments that one can launch into the meaningless floating, the *flânerie* of specta(c)torship, a loosely defined net art<sup>(?)</sup> scene as the background, instead of the Paris Salon.

Kenneth Goldsmith notes in *Wasting Time on The Internet* that '[t]he flâneur is hardwired into the ethos of the Internet: we "browse" the web with our "browsers," "surfing" from site to site, voyeuristically "lurking" from the sidelines' (Goldsmith 2016, 64). Goldsmith is linking the online spectator on the one hand with the figure of the flâneur, or that of the situationist *dériviste*, but on the other hand with the pop-culture figure of the *zombie*. Attached to our devices, oblivious to the 'physical reality' around us, we act like *zombies* driven by the insatiable desire to consume (Goldsmith 2016, 61-65). And the two opposing figures of the entertained consumer and of the

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<sup>237</sup> My translation: 'As for the Salon, Alas! I have lied to you a little bit, but so little! I have visited the Salon, only once, to search for the novelties, but I found very few, and for the old names, or the names that I simply knew, I trust my old memory stimulated by the booklet [catalogue]'. (Baudelaire 1906, 209-10)



always ambivalent, bored, flâneur remain quasi-undistinguishable.<sup>238</sup> And what is at stake in specta(c)torship is exactly the impossible distinction between the two and the impossibilities opened by its emergence. Scroll lightly, surf, take the wrong turn. It is through this kind of aimless, useless scrolling that the question mark weighing upon our received identities could emerge.<sup>239</sup>

It is not that *After Hours* directly represents this theme of flânerie, but rather that in the problematic of work and leisure that it playfully brings to the fore one can recognize the (guilty) intermediary position of the flâneur, a position that might resonate with the very gesture of specta(c)torship that one is engaged in. The flâneur is not the proletarian, but neither the bourgeois comfortable with

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<sup>238</sup> A figure of digital flânerie that points towards a problematization of consumerism from within appears repeatedly in discourses concerned with the internet and *net art*(?). Countering Evgeny Morozov's claim that the cyberflâneur was obliterated by the contemporary developments of the internet, artist Jesse Darling writes in a short piece republished in *Mass Effect: Art and the Internet in the Twenty-First Century*: 'The flâneur, according to Morozov is someone who doesn't know what he cares about: if that's what it takes, then surely flânerie is alive and well over on Yelp and YouTube and 4chan' (Darling 2015, 328), an argument that should be understood in relation to Darling's preceding contention: '[w]e may never own the means of production as such, but will continue to assert, pervert, and subvert the commons anyway: a gesture of post-corporeal territorial pissing that necessitates neither phallus nor spray can nor html' (Darling 2015, 328). In another article republished in the same collection, art historian Alex Kitnick, talking about Mark Leckey's view of contemporary internet culture as 'The Long Tail'—the online aggregate of niche markets ever accumulating content, that, as a whole, is replacing the short-lived Big Hits and Blockbusters ('the Head') as the main driver of cultural markets (Leckey 2015, 201)—suggests that Leckey is 'a kind of *flâneur* of the Long Tail' inasmuch as Leckey is immersed in the new consumption regimes on the internet, while at the same time having 'at least one foot outside it' with an 'amused, ironic, rather dandyish stance' (Kitnick 2015, 220).

<sup>239</sup> It is significant that internet *surfing* (*surfing*, describing in this case not only browsing, but also collecting, reframing and engaging with digital objects found online) is a significant practice in net art(?), for the spectators as well as for the artists (and the dividing lines between the two are continuously blurred), at least in the period prior to the rise of social networks. See (Cornell 2018, 90-91).

their role at the heart of the system, and much less the capitalist entrepreneur. The *flanêurs* (inasmuch as they exhaust themselves in boredom and spleen, doing nothing (

#### **VI.4. Boredom**

In the context of the culture industry boredom is a terrifying disease. Being bored and spreading boredom is an appalling violence towards the system, that comes with all the guilt and *jouissance* of a horrific crime (flowers of evil?). Probably, no one understood this better than the modernist writer Lu Xun, who in his 1924 short story 'Revenge', makes one of the most bitterly relevant critiques of capitalist society. With the risk of boring you, it is worth quoting in its entirety (Hsun 1974, 14-15):

Human skin is probably less than a millimeter thick, and below, through a network of blood vessels denser than the densely packed tuftoses which crawl one over the other up the wall, there races hot red blood, radiating warmth. And with this warmth people charm, excite and attract each other, desperately eager to cuddle, kiss and embrace so as to enjoy the intoxicating ecstasy of life.

But one stab with a sharp knife through this thin, peach-coloured skin will make the hot red blood spurt out like an arrow to flood the killer directly with all its warmth; then, the exhalation of icy breath, the sight of pallid lips, will take him out of himself, bringing him the transcendent, supreme ecstasy of life; while as for his victim, he is forever steeped in the transcendent, supreme ecstasy of life.

This being so, the two of them, stripped naked and grasping sharp knives, confront each other in the vast wilderness.

The two of them will embrace, will kill each other...

From all sides passers-by hasten there, densely packed as tussore crawling up walls or ants carrying off salted fish-heads. They are smartly dressed but empty-handed. Yet from all sides they hasten there, and crane their necks desperately to feast their eyes on this embrace or slaughter. Already they have a foretaste of the sweat or blood on their own tongues when it is over.

However, the two of them confront each other in the vast wilderness, stripped naked and grasping sharp knives, neither embracing nor killing and, moreover, showing no intention of embracing or killing.

The two of them keep this up to eternity, their full, living bodies nearly atrophied, yet showing not the least intention of embracing or killing.

The passers-by become bored. They feel boredom seeping into their pores, feel boredom from their hearts seeping out of their pores to creep all over the wilderness and seep into the pores of others. Their throats and tongues become parched, their necks tiered. Finally they look at one another blankly and gradually disperse, feeling so atrophied that they have even lost their interest in life.

Then all that is left is the vast wilderness, with the two of them stripped naked and grasping sharp knives in atrophied confrontation. They feast their eyes, eyes like those of the dead, on the atrophy of the passers-by, their bloodless massacre, and are steeped forever in the transcendent, supreme ecstasy of life.

December 20, 1924

To (mis)read: breaking the promise of entertainment is an abhorrent crime that numbs the mass of respectable citizens, smartly dressed and empty handed. A crowd of depressed, lifeless, consumers deprived of the thrills they were promised, of the hot blood and sweat flowing in sex or murder. The unbearable passive contemplation of a potentiality (never to be actualized) exhausts the force of life. And a couple of performers, actors, that in their hyper-active (because their confrontation is brimming with potential, but also because they are exerting themselves in standing still) passivity become their own victims exactly inasmuch as they are the victors. A couple of performers bored to death, exhausted, yet 'steeped forever in the transcendent, supreme ecstasy of life'. The problem is not that of identifying the performers with the oppressive entertainment industry that (intentionally) fails to deliver its promise and the crowd with the funned, exploited, murdered consumers; nor is it that of identifying the mass of consumers as oppressors always in search of new thrills, and the performers with the dissidents that bring the promised revolution through boredom. Although both these (mis)readings would be tempting and justified. What is more relevant for our discussion though, is the extent to which the critique is recursive and self referential, not the accusation of an Other, but a recursive crisis of the self. One is the aggressor as much as the victim. '[T]he two of them, stripped naked, and grasping sharp knives' are obviously in this ambiguous self-contradictory position: exhausted, bored spectators just as much as murderers covered in the blood they drained, 'forever steeped in the transcendent, supreme ecstasy of life'.

In the (mis)reading that I propose, it is the spectacularization and reification of the intensive dynamics of life that is mocked and criticized here. The vitality that the blood stands for (the thrill and the excitement of sharing it in intimate embrace, as well as the always imminent danger of

losing it) is canceled in a vicious circle of entertainment and spectacle: the promise of the satisfaction and gratification of desire, the very promise that produces and amplifies the reified desire that it pretends to satisfy—a consumerist circle of commodified, unsatisfied desire. It is this circle that reinforces the consumer in its own image, in its 'natural' embodied self. There is no 'natural' self prior to this reification. What the consumer desires and consumes is itself as a mass produced image, the aftertaste of sweat or blood that would frame the self as the lover, the murderer, the victim (i.e. 'the hero') while keeping a pretense of innocence: after all, we consumers, are 'empty handed'. As consumers, we strive to fit the characters of the industrially produced meta-narrative, and we are nothing but the products of these narratives (with Bernard Stiegler, our memories and identities are already industrially produced).<sup>240</sup>

In other words: we force ourselves along well established narrative lines in the confines of the <strike>human</strike> image; what the two performers do, their crime, is to open a crisis of identity by stalling the machine of entertainment. Boredom clogs the inter-individual system of relations. But there is nothing innocent in this process, Lu Xun's story suggests. Lingering at the threshold between love and murder, disrupting the vicious circle of desire instantiated by the culture industry, the two performers are as guilty as if they were swinging the knives, perversely 'steeped in the transcendent, supreme ecstasy' of the lives they drain (including their own).

This is the 'acting', the performance, that I would like the (c) of specta(c)torship to point towards. The exhaustion in doing nothing, the erring, the flânerie of the hyper-active yet passive gesture through which the crisis of identity is opened. The infinitely suspended promise of love and death. If the performers are to touch, if the blood is to flow, if the parentheses are to be closed, specta(c)torship is nothing more than consumerism, specta©torship, narcissistically confirming

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<sup>240</sup> See (Stiegler 2009, 97-9).

one's image in its naturalness, one's <strike>human</strike> identity. The '=' inherent in the 'a is a' closes the parentheses of the (c) of specta(c)torship in the © of consumerism/specta©torship. The difference between specta(c)torship and specta©torship resides in the ability to keep the crisis of identity open, in the ability to keep oneself opened up as a suspended question, to remain over-actively inert, facing the naked other holding the sharp knife in the impossible promise of love and death. Guiltily so.

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, inasmuch as they work wrongly, aimlessly, endlessly) are just parasites, glitches at the heart of the system. And, inasmuch as the flâneur is a glitch in the distribution of labour and fun, a glitch in the culture industry, it is also a glitch at the very core of our systems of identity. What surfaces through the exhaustion and boredom of flanêrie is the radical uncertainty regarding the oneness and identity of the one that thinks; the embodied 'I' appears as an erroneous fiction.

### **VI.5. (Still) *After Hours***

*After Hours*: the hint of an impossible sea, a shark's fin lurks through the gray grassy landscape that surrounds the colorful checkered dance floor. A party on the shores of an inexistent ocean, clothes covering volumes of emptiness, distorted bodies, angular trees, and the calm blue sky above covered with flimsy clouds. In the context of *The Wrong*, it is not too far fetched to read the virtual world of *After Hours* as a pointer towards a bitter-sweet dystopian future predicated on technological progress gone awry, an image that manages to be repulsive while at the same time proving deeply attractive.

There is a whole genre of video works that use CGI to present a dystopian future populated by distorted, fragmented, emptied bodies, and it is not absent from this edition of *The Wrong*. Yorgos

Papafigos' video *The Ladder* in the *Hysterophimia Pavilion* by foteini vergidou,<sup>241</sup> for example, is described as '[...] a comment on contemporary society and a preview to a post-human era. The composition consists of CGI monochromatic bodies without a specific identity, race, gender or ethnicity and is executed associatively, free of form and without a clear narrative'.<sup>242</sup> It is representative for this larger concern with the transformation and objectification of bodies in a future that is subsumed to the logic of machines. *Death Has a Small Voice* by Alex Myers in *The Airport Lounge Pavilion* by Owen Vince<sup>243</sup> offers impulses to think in a similar direction. The short video, shows a small island floating midair against an out of focus background that suggests a dark earth below and a gray blue, cloudy sky above. The island is covered with grass and yellow flowers, there is a dead tree stump whose roots pierce the floating island and hang in the empty space below, and a few human-made objects appear in disarray, among which a big blue box that burns in the middle of the island. Two human-like figures, one lying down motionless, possibly dead, possibly wounded (one of the legs seems to be resting beside the body, detached from it), but facing what seems to be a mobile phone screen; the other one, standing at the edge of the island, absorbed in doing something on its mobile phone, obviously oblivious to everything around—a couple of abstract symbols continuously emerge from the phone screen (with the familiar beeps and clicks that usually reward successful tasks in mobile phone games) and fall in the emptiness below. We quickly (mis)recognize ourselves as the figure enchanted by the screen; everything around spins out of control, while we are absorbed in our small, rewarding, labour-fun activities in 'virtual reality'.

A similar ironical critique emerges from *IFSR*, a video work by George Jasper Stone and Suzannah Pettigrew, with soundscape by cktrl, presented in the *Cyber Sanctuaries Pavilion* by Specter

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<sup>241</sup> <https://hysterophimia.net/yorgos-papafigos/> (the link is presently broken), images and info about the work at: <https://yorgospapafigos.com/The-ladder>.

<sup>242</sup> <https://hysterophimia.net/yorgos-papafigos/> (the link is presently broken).

<sup>243</sup> See the work at: <https://theportlounge.wixsite.com/entrance/copy-of-home-1>.

(<https://specter.world>).<sup>244</sup> While we see a distorted and fragmentary body steeped in the waves of a computer generated sea, the voiceover narrates the futuristic experience of escaping the reality by going to a spa in virtual reality. 'I feel so relaxed here, what a beautiful, infinite simulation!' exclaims the soothing voiceover, 'recommended experience time: 15min, 300MB'. In the same pavilion *The Node*, by Noviki<sup>245</sup> looks at the architecture of a city as a network of information exchange and imagines a confrontation of the 'smart city' with itself as the contest inherent in a generative adversarial network (GAN).<sup>246</sup> The 'smart city' has two voices, one corresponding to the generative network and the other to the discriminative network, in which the task of the generative network is to generate a narrative that would pass as true for the discriminative network whose task is to distinguish the true from the false. While the inner confrontation of the city with itself evolves in the audio narrative, the virtual camera passes through the static, distorted images of a city, which seem to be merely a fragmentary covering sheet over volumes of emptiness, a pierced façade that fails to hide the nothingness behind it. Ironic commercial messages and fragments of social media chats often appear towards the margins of the screen adding another layer to the already complex interplay of the audio-visual experience. The dwellers of the city seem to be caught in the inner confrontation of the information network with itself.

*After Hours* can be understood too, in line with these works, as a take on a dystopian future and manages, at least from my point of view, to bring forth the interplay of contradictions (the dread and the fascination provoked by the possibility of a future predicated on bodies different than ours) inherent in it without engaging either in a full blown critique of such a future, or in presenting it as a liberatory technological trans-/post-human paradise. Hence the fascination of this guilty floating at

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<sup>244</sup> See the work at: <https://specter.world/Cleanse>.

<sup>245</sup> See the work at: <https://specter.world/Ground>.

<sup>246</sup> See the entry for this work at <http://noviki.net/WORKS/portfolio/the-node/> (the link is currently broken), accessed 19.06.2020.



the surface driven by fragile, unsolvable, question marks and not by the assured exclamations and words of order. The guilty pleasure of strolling aimlessly through a garden of earthly delights. And, what is at stake even in this imaginary erring through a dystopian technologized future, is oneself, one's(?) body and one's consciousness. Behind numerous incriminations of the de-humanizing technology, one cannot help but feel a deep desire and curiosity towards the monsters that claim to be there as a warning, and moreover a powerful drive towards becoming those very monsters, or towards recognizing oneself as such a monster.

What it all adds up to for the spectator, in the end, I claim, is a question mark that bears upon one's embodied subjectivity, a question mark that destabilizes the 'I' in its corporeality and forces it to think, that is, forces it to question and to betray itself, to deterritorialize itself towards a dynamic problematic field. And this is the question that, in the end, drives this entire act of specta(c)torship that inscribes its traces here, a question that coagulates from a deep skepticism regarding the appropriateness of the labels of identity used to model one's existence into institutionally acceptable forms that fit current socio-economic and political contexts: individual <strike>human</strike> bodies limited by their skin (... and their passports... and their credit cards). The destabilization of the received system of identities—denoted and at the very same time performed by this question mark—offers the possibility of erring in the space of the crisis opened up by the acknowledgement of the constructed nature of our corporeal being.

It is certainly not new anymore to accept that one's identity is constructed, that the 'natural' subject in all its materiality is a virtual fiction writing itself into actuality, that the most immediate reality—one's own(?) body—is already thickly mediated, in other words that one's corporeal identity, one's(?) body screaming 'I' in its materiality, is not an objective, natural, a priori reality to be discovered in

the world outside, but a fragile fiction (a necessary one) that is constantly written towards the unknown, towards an absolute otherness.

The question mark that this chapter followed concerns the practices through which one's body is repeatedly constructed and deconstructed in the space of a crisis of identity. The problem is that of specta(c)torship as a transgressive practice that would fracture the logic of inter-individual relations—and the stable individual shaped by them—in order to reach the unstable and dangerous space of transindividual collectives in which individuality is a perpetual problem, a continuous negotiation, and not an answer. That is, the practice of putting oneself into question, of opening oneself towards an unpredictable, impossible becoming, by means of participation in a transindividual collective. The chapter argued that in the context of a culture industry that extends the alienating logic of exploitive labour to all aspects of society, the figure of the <strike>human</strike> (understood as an uncritical form of defining individuals, as a widespread figure that grounds and is grounded by inertial inter-individual relations) is forcefully imposed upon a complex field of becoming (the psychic individual, the embodied subject, never fully defined, always searching for itself towards an absolute otherness) both through futile labour and through entertainment, fun, leisure (a domain that purports to offer an escape from the logic of labour).<sup>247</sup> Thus, if we are searching for a practice that could rupture the space of inter-individual relations and offer a chance for the question mark that one *is* to emerge beyond a facile humanism, then we would have to turn our attention to figures that remain suspended somewhere at the periphery of the all encompassing culture industry refusing both work and entertainment, while at the very same time remaining deeply immersed in them. I propose to think of the flâneur as such a figure, and consequently to understand the (c) of net art(?)

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<sup>247</sup> In the previous chapters we discussed the same problem from the perspective of surveillance, and then with respect to the functioning of digital objects.

specta(c)torship (including the process through which this text emerged) as a figure of online flânerie.

The point is not that the figure of the flâneur exhausts the meaning of the parenthetical (c) of specta(c)torship, but rather that it is one of its embodied instances.<sup>248</sup> The relevance of flânerie for our discussion resides in its problematization of a modernist context that arguably still inheres in our socio-political and economic system (see the modern figure of the <strike>human</strike>) and that is further extended and problematized by net art(?) practices.<sup>249</sup>

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<sup>248</sup> Another such instance, similar with respect to the interplay of passivity and activity delineated here, even if significantly different with respect to the political-economic-social context, is suggested by the figure of Zhong Ziqi for example. See the *Introduction*.

<sup>249</sup> For an understanding of net art(?) as the last avant-garde, reverse engineering modernism see (Daniels 2009). I take the fact that several discourses on net art(?) critically engage with the figure of the flâneur (see above) to point towards the legitimacy of addressing the problematic of flânerie in the context of this text.

## Conclusion

In short, this book proposes to understand net art<sup>(?)</sup> specta(c)torship as a process of individuation through which the embodied thinking subject (the ~~human~~ spectator) emerges, always unequal with itself, as a product of relations. It critically engages with Gilbert Simondon's theory of individuation arguing that, in order to account for the emergence of identity, the ontogenetic problematic, that Simondon outlines, has to be complemented by a phenomenogenetic one—the question of the genesis of phenomena. The text contends that the process of specta(c)torship problematizes the conjunction of the ontogenetic and phenomenogenetic dimensions of individuation by opening the embodied thinking subject towards a crisis of identity. In this light, net art<sup>(?)</sup> specta(c)torship is understood as a process that affords a context specific (de)construction of the ~~human~~ body of the spectator. The context specificity refers to the particular configuration of the archival background upon which and against which the process of specta(c)torship (as an anarchival event) happens, yet this contingency is recursively folded back into the ontogenetic dynamic as an absolute (lack of) origin.

The parenthetical (c) points towards a paradoxical interplay of activity and passivity inherent in the methodology that opens up the process of specta(c)torship. In the case of net art<sup>(?)</sup> specta(c)torship I claim that this methodology is akin to *flânerie*, an aimless drifting amidst commodified digital objects, an aimless drifting that potentially creates a glitch in the apparently seamless flows of labour and entertainment of the culture industry. It is this glitch that affords the deconstruction of the modern ~~human~~ body, but only in order to fail into the construction of other fictional identities.

There are thus four interlinked problems that surface in the process of net art<sup>(?)</sup> specta(c)torship as it is navigated by this text: 1. a crisis of identity as (de)construction of the embodied ~~human~~ subject; 2. an individuation towards the unknown, yet always guided by an erroneous principle of identity that emerges as a double ontogenetic/phenomenogenetic problematic; 3. a dependence of individuation on particular archives and archival practices that striate the phenomenological plane, a dependence that makes individuation intrinsically a situated political and technological problematic; 4. a specific methodology, online flânerie, as embodied practice of navigating the digital archive in the open space of the crisis of identity.

Finally, we can map this discussion onto the three questions that were set out in the introduction:

1) What are the *parerga* (the limits, the contours) that would define the bodies that emerge in net art<sup>(?)</sup> specta(c)torship?

The hypothesis formulated in *Chapter II* was that net art<sup>(?)</sup> specta(c)torship problematizes a specific contemporary form of the panoptic gaze that shapes us into the ~~human~~ form, but that, at the same time, net art<sup>(?)</sup> specta(c)torship remains under the action of this panoptic system rather than transcending it. We understand now that what is at stake here is a double phenomenogenetic/ontogenetic problematic that happens in the space opened by the (de)construction of ~~human~~ embodied subjectivity, that beyond the question of the *parerga* that contour the embodied subject, there is that of a historically contingent principle of identity, pertinent to a specific, situated, phenomenological plane, a principle of identity that is nonetheless folded back into the ontogenetic beginning as an absolute origin. To clarify: it is only upon specific phenomenological planes that sensing and acting upon objects that remain consistent with themselves makes sense; it is only upon specific phenomenological planes that pointing out, or

speaking about, an object makes sense (and this set of phenomenological planes is more restricted than the previous one); it is only upon a specific set of phenomenological planes (again more restricted than the previous set) that an abstract 'one' can emerge, 'a = a', 'a is a', 'there is *an* a' etc., and the coagulation of this abstract 'one', of a principle of identity is co-constitutive with the emergence of forms of embodied subjectivity, 'I' (which does not simply mean saying 'I', but the consciousness of *being a body* in the world).<sup>250</sup> Specific forms of embodied subjectivity and corresponding specific articulations (conscious or not) of the principle of identity (what constitutes a 'one', what are its limits, at what point stops being a 'one', what are its dynamics, how it becomes, etc.) are all situated and dependent upon the historical contingencies of what I called 'cultural' archives with their inherent political and technological dynamics.<sup>251</sup> Yet, the principle of identity, in its contingent historicity is folded back into the ontogenetic origin: the entire world (and its becoming) exists in the aftermath of historically contingent events. Exactly because of this folding, the situatedness of the phenomenological plane is not simply something that emerges at a specific historical point in ontogenesis, but the very ground of ontogenesis as such. The problematic of embodied subjectivity then, is the problematic of the conjunction between the phenomenogenetic and ontogenetic dimensions of individuation.

Net art<sup>(?)</sup> specta(c)torship, as an anarchival event, disturbs the coagulation of a specific form of embodied subjectivity (the ~~human~~ embodied subject) and as such problematizes and brings to the fore (denaturalizing) the principle of identity intertwined with it. Because of the

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<sup>250</sup> Embodied subjectivity in this sense goes beyond the confines of what we come to misunderstand as the ~~human~~ body.

<sup>251</sup> Again, I maintain that 'cultural' archives are not exclusively associated with (what we mistakenly) identify as ~~human~~ embodied identities. Languages and tools are, for example, instances of such 'cultural' archives, and it is clear now that neither is limited to the ~~human~~ and its (de)constructions.

folding of ontogenesis and phenomenogenesis, this is not only a problematic bearing upon our specific historical situation, but also upon what we understand to be the world and its basic dynamics, including, especially the coagulation of identity. In practical terms, it is a situation that, as I underlined in different places in the book, harbours immense promises but also commensurate dangers (political, cultural, environmental among others).

## 2) Can these bodies still be conceived as 'human'?

The preliminary conclusion reached in *Chapter II* was that the ~~human~~ embodied subjectivity is the result of an ongoing process of (de)construction, and that net art(?) specta(c)torship opens a crisis of embodied subjectivity by destabilizing this process from within. We can say now more precisely that, strictly speaking, inasmuch as an embodied individual is in a process of psychic individuation it cannot support the label ~~human~~, the only attribute that it can take is just a question mark. Yet, at the very same time, a principle of identity will necessarily ground this process of individuation (as an originary lack of origin), and this principle of identity will be intertwined with specific forms of embodied subjectivity (de)constructed in the very process that they ground. These embodied subjectivities can be ~~human~~ or otherwise, but importantly, all possible forms of embodied subjectivity are the results of such (de)constructive processes and not a priori 'realities'.

## 3) What is gained and what is lost by attaching the label 'human' to these bodies?

*Chapter II* argued that enclosing embodied subjectivity in the limits of the ~~human~~ body undermines the radical otherness inherent in the embodied subject—we can say now, the radical otherness inherent in the ongoing process of individuation that constitutes the embodied

subject and its world. In the subsequent argumentation the answer to this question went in two interrelated yet distinct directions (each with a multitude of facets): enclosing a body in the <strike>human</strike> identity forecloses thinking by trapping the embodied subject in representational thought, and at the same time forecloses the possibility of critically understanding thinking; enclosing a body in the <strike>human</strike> identity has political consequences inasmuch as it collapses transindividual collectives (in which embodied subjectivity is continuously negotiated) into systems of inter-individual relations (in which individuals fit their image in the system). There is an ethic of bodily difference, then, that runs throughout the book. On the one hand, the text argues that all bodies are different from themselves in virtue of the pre-individual problematic that drives their becoming; on the other hand, it contends that each body is a process of individuation, and that each process of individuation happens in the intimacy of the common—in relation to all other processes of individuation. Bodily difference is from this perspective inherent to any process of individuation in two fundamental ways: the difference from itself that drives individuation from its outside (in the case of psychic individuation the 'I myself' as Other constitutes an unreachable telos of individuation, constitutes the question mark that describes the identity of the body in the process of individuation), and the difference of others which are integral to the process of individuation and shape individuation from its inside (the 'I' is nothing but the result of a dynamic of otherness). In this sense, I understand the insistence on the (de)construction of one's embodied subjectivity to be driven by an ethical concern towards otherness in its two forms outlined above and an argument for the impossibility of a solipsistic definition of embodied subjectivity.

I consider that on a theoretical level this framework sets up the stage for recognizing radical otherness and making space for the voice of the other to be heard. Nonetheless more work needs to be done in order to address the diversity of specific forms of embodied subjectivity and the political



stakes associated with marginalized, underrepresented bodies that endure ongoing violence. The framework that I have put forward here makes it clear on an abstract level that embodied experience, in its contingency, constitutes the (usually unacknowledged) ground for every possible understanding of the world, and that the world as such in its most basic being and becoming is always already intertwined with such understanding—this is one of the basic meanings of the folding of the phenomenological plane into the ontogenetic origin. I have also engaged in a critical reading of Yuk Hui's idea of 'cosmotechnics' in order to underline that the world ('cosmos') in its being and becoming is dependent upon 'cultural' archives (with their inherent political and technological aspects) which subtend embodied experience. Yet the book stops short of further considering the actual experiences of marginalized bodies that are bearing archives of violence in them.<sup>252</sup> The problematic that opens up with such a discussion is extremely complex and it would necessitate extensive further research, which cannot fit in the limits of this project.

This work remains, then, a provisional proposition for understanding the embodied experience and associated milieu (world) of historically contingent <strike>human</strike> bodies in an ongoing process of (de)construction. It puts forward a set of hypothesis regarding being and becoming in their generality, yet insists that this very generality, the generality of the world, is grounded in a situated historical position (the phenomenological plane emerges in the process of ontogenesis that it grounds as an absolute beginning).

### *Coda*

I<sup>(?)</sup> claim that this text, that you are reading now, is nothing but the trace of a process of specta(c)torship, driven by a methodology that could be best described as online flânerie. A trace inscribed on the more or less realistic representation of a piece of paper on a computer screen

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<sup>252</sup> For a consideration of how archives of violence play upon embodied subjectivity cf. (Singh 2018).

(Pages on Mac in this case). It is important that this text is written as a .pages/.dox document and not as a .txt document, and neither as a .html hypertext, for example—in that case it would have been written differently, it would have worked differently, it would have been read differently and it would have meant something completely different. Yet, what 'I' am saying here is said inasmuch as 'I' ignore these differences, inasmuch as 'I' ignore the affordances of digital signifiers by writing on the representation of a piece of paper, by accepting its traditional linearity and institutionally reinforced limits. Also, 'I' was able over the last few years to develop this project only inasmuch as 'I' wrote in such a way that differences between the written and the spoken signifiers were obscured. And this is an essential failure—absolutely necessary for completing a Ph.D. in a system that values above all else a type of institutional networking based on identity (where the drive towards identity means claiming to be equal with oneself at the expense of neglecting the radical heterogeneity of the field of relations that actually produces the research).<sup>253</sup> In order for the signature to mean anything, in order for me to be able to claim 'rights' to these thoughts, to own them and thus to insert them and myself<sup>(?)</sup> in a capitalist system of knowledge predicated on production and property, in order for me to be able to take responsibility for what 'I' am saying here (and credit), and more than that in order for the 'I' to make any sense at all, 'I' have to ignore the difference between the 'I' that speaks and the 'I' that writes, also those between the 'I' that signifies from a piece of paper, the 'I' that signifies from the screen, and the 'I' that signifies from a screen pretending to be a piece of paper—Word and Pages, the apotheosis of mimesis. This cannot be a problem of 'human' and 'non-human' agents really, simply because there is nothing there to define the 'human' and its others in the first place, the 'human' is nothing without the violence of its <strike>s.

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<sup>253</sup> To clarify: the agency behind this text is a complex intertwining of relations that goes way beyond anything that could be reduced to a <strike>human</strike> body, yet 'I' am operating in a system in which 'I' have to claim this as 'my' work, to pretend that this identity makes sense, and moreover that it is the only possible one for designating the agency behind this work.

The 'I' that thinks, the 'I' that speaks, the 'I' that writes, are undefinable in their multiplicity, cannot bear the weight of a name. Language can point towards them, but cannot grasp them. What can be grasped is the violence of the imposition of unity and identity upon these bodies, the political brutality of our signed and copyrighted texts, and its ontogenetic and phenomenogenetic consequences: the inertial reinforcement of the ~~human~~ body which is at the same time violently fragmented and deconstructed. Every signature is a crime, every copyright sign is a theft as long as they render the text back to a fictive ~~human~~ subject, identical with itself, that takes credit and responsibility for it.

Inasmuch as this is a trace of specta(c)torship the imposition of the ~~human~~ figure is problematized from within, not surpassed, but arguably thrown into crisis. A (de)construction that differs and defers the embodied thinking subject that constitutes its goal (but constitutes its goal only inasmuch as it remains an open question). Inasmuch as it is finished and signed though this text closes the problematic that it purports to open up.

Having understood that, let us begin with an exergue:



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