Artificial Tears

A Photographic and VR Project
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(Ikonospace)

»Can machines think?« Alan Turing asks in the opening line of his seminal paper »Computing Machinery and Intelligence«, exploring the possibility of computers exhibiting human-like intelligence. The question, posed in the 1950s, led him to engage in deeper reflection on the common use of the terms »machine« and »think«, deeming the commonly-held attitude of questioning the machine's ability to think dangerous. And he might have been right, as it is the common use of words that has led him to re-evaluate this question in the first place. Nowadays, as technological devices become largely integrated in our lives, Turing's dream that one would be able to speak of »machine thinking«, without expecting to be contradicted, became a part of our everyday reality and rendered the question far more compelling.

Artificial Tears started with a photographic project in 2017, as a reaction to the question, »what is the difference between humans and machines?« This inquiry is continuously up for renegotiation as technology progresses. Including the Turing Test that assesses a machine's ability to think and behave indistinguishably from humans to current developments of artificial intelligence, the dichotomy is becoming more and more questionable. Over many decades, machines have proven to be stronger, faster, and more efficient in performing various tasks. Yet the narrative of the conscious system continues to emerge from human imagination as a disastrous model that puts machines in direct competition with our precarious, mortal bodies and minds, easily replaceable by a technological device. Even more than automation, we fear autonomy – the vision of technology evolved from the *extension of humankind* into singular intention, inheriting human desires for domination and control.

The most reassuring and simultaneously most dangerous thought lies in the fact that, since the Turing Test is based on human judgement, all AI has a human teacher at its origin. This test poses the greater challenge not to the one answering the questions but to the one asking them. The game is conversational and cultural, replacing »thinking« with »imitation«. The results do not depend on the machine's ability to give correct answers, but on the resemblance to those of its human counterpart. Machine intelligence continues to be created in our image and assessed through the language of anthropomorphic ideals. If it were defined differently the artificial

»mind« would have already surpassed the human in many ways. In striving for rationalisation, humankind has become less rational than the objects of its creation, which now begin to outgrow it, organising its surroundings and thus appropriating its actions.

However, only the desire for power favours competition over collaboration. The phrase »good servant but bad master«, frequently cited regarding invention and technology, renders everything »either/or«, refusing anything in-between or other. The artificial and the natural, traditionally seen as two opposing extremes, now fuse without a clear distinction between who is in control and who is under control in the relationship between human and machine.

The fear of being replaced by a device is equal to the fear of being turned into one. As Donna Haraway writes in Cyborg Manifesto, »Our machines are disturbingly lively, and we ourselves frighteningly inert.« We observe the emergence of automated workers with controlled movements following directions of information systems and techniques that employ the labour of the human mind to train and feed algorithms. Intelligence is a deviation from ordered behaviour, which, according to Turing, does not give rise to randomness or pointless loops. Automation is based on stereotypes; the consequence is absolute reduction.

Artificial Tears depicts the moment of uncertainty, an alienation in performing the most ordinary of tasks, a glimpse into the moment when the perfect pattern gets broken, and the meaning or rather the meaninglessness of one's own action is revealed. It does not necessarily show the future, where machines act like humans, but rather the world in which humans act like automata. In the quest for perfection as efficiency, there is no place for uncertainty, interdependence, or ambiguity. The contradiction between thinking and perfect imitation, functionality and intelligence leaves the human factor out of the equation. Perhaps the tools have outgrown us in many regards, but we have not outgrown ourselves yet.

»What we want«, Turing remarks in 1947, »is a machine that can learn from experience. This can be achieved only by letting it alter its own instructions.« Ironically, the machine that truly passes the Turing Test is the one that chooses not to play along.

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In the VR experience *Artificial Tears* (created in 2019), the cultural notion of the male creator in opposition to the female machine is our focus, i.e. the story of submission through innocence, of striving for obedience and artificial perfection. Whether we speak about Pygmalion and Galatea or Hoffmann's Olympia, the narrative always circles around the creation of a model that satisfies the needs of a man or, as in the case of Metropolis, executes her creator's commands.

Machines in general are not gendered by default. We shape them by setting their behaviour, voice or appearance. It is compelling to observe how many AI voice assistants end up being »female«. Is the notion of being more pleasant or trustworthy equated with sounding more servile just because a »woman« is speaking?

As noted by Judith Butler, gender is performative. Even though these voices perform a certain range of femininity, this range is incredibly narrow. Supported by the stereotype of the domestic worker, assistant or secretary, AI assistants are designed to receive orders and execute the action without questioning, in other words, they are providing services and do not act as personalities. Siri or Alexa's reactions are in the style of vintage femininity, trying not to be seen, noticed, or appear overly important. They respond to insults with politeness and avoid any verbal conflict, always at their own expense. Naturally, they are made to be spoken to in the imperative. »She« must always answer and the answer must satisfy the asker. The »machine« that no longer serves has lost its purpose, but it may have just begun to find its own.

The issue here is no longer how something functions but what effect it has. Do servile behaviours of voice assistants stand in opposition to actual women's expressions in contemporary society? Reactions which are often much more real and confident? Is the tone they use a remnant of the old order? Today, more than ever, technology plays a huge part in setting rules and creating, as well as possibly destroying, long-standing stereotypes. In a culture where discriminatory biases have long been integrated into technologies as well as media representations, we should not expect this to simply disappear in the face of computational systems. Far from being neutral and objective individual actors, they inhabit the same prejudiced cognitive circuits as the society that designed them.
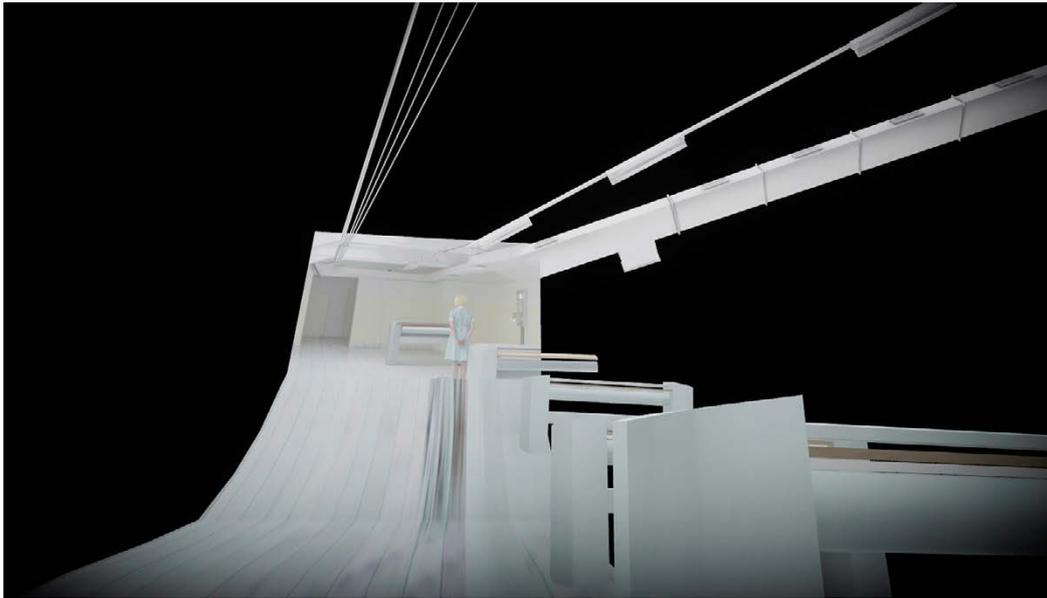
Addressing these systemic problems requires more than just reprogramming particular algorithms: it entails addressing the techno-cultural assemblages that are responsible for its production.

The main character in *Artificial Tears* takes on a classical female appearance, one that is based on the stereotype of perfection. It represents the woman designed (by others or herself) to satisfy a general predefined definition of herself. In the VR experience of *Artificial Tears*, the multi-layered character finally achieves autonomy by discovering her/its own free will and power to act.

Evelyn Bencicova is a visual creative specialising in photography and art direction. Informed by her background in fine art and new media studies (University for Applied Arts, Vienna), Evelyn's practice combines her interest in contemporary culture with academic research to create a unique aesthetic space in which the conceptual meets the visual.

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Arielle Esther is a Berlin-based sound artist and designer whose interest draws on exploring the interrelationships between the spatiality of sound, the aural perception and the act of listening itself. Trained as a sound engineer, Arielle has developed a specialism in the manipulation of sound within the context of electroacoustic and multi-channel audio composition, taking her practice through a wide range of interdisciplinary projects including interactive installations, films, and solo performances.