There is no digital art

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Sommaire

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https://gitlab.com/suetanvil/bitart

Introduction

Ada LaNerd, undisciplined proleterian rather than transdisciplinary artist: the absence of any financial capital forces me to rent my workforce as an added value captured by some bourgeois, currently in a bar of a luxury hotel from which I just escaped to come here. However my social, cultural, symbolic capitals allow me to benefit from material priviledges, including this invitation here, even though I will have to go back to work right after.

Thanks to the students of the Compagnie des lundis for their trust and to Marine Froeliger for having put us in contact via the hackerspace Hackstub. I've been there for 10 years, besides numerous wonderful people, including the members of our house of Hacqueen that gathers and develops cyberfeminist practices between women and gender minorities since 2 years.

Since I haven't studied more than a few failed semesters in maths, physics and computer science because of my undisciplinarity, I only owe my theoretical background to my surroundings and to precious resources. Any list is not exhaustive but I will still refer to some of them today. Despite the importance and the coherence of the ecological aspects, I will voluntarily let this topic aside here. I still trust you to answer sincerily and question any dead-angle of my argument.

Even though the title of this talk is purposely provoking, I mind to precise that the object of my political critique is not to clash the artists whose practices are captive from the capitalist system (we are all nowadays more or less) : I mostly care about showcasing some works that I admire or value an evocative intention ; only whishing for us to get to an accessible emancipation. I will also describe some ways

towards emancipation and cite some artists whose practices are « free » but whose work stay de facto more confidential because of a radicality in their monstration despite their quality.

To go back to the title : for his documentary about the porn industry, Raphael Siboni chose the Lacanian adage « there is no sexual intercourse ». The porn that is revealed there, by the french producer HPG, is an excellent analogy to summarize one the main issue of this talk : how from a fundamental impulse the industry exploits and humiliates humans to make profit of it.

The artist-researcher Célin Jiang (aka Bisou Magique 茜茜) uses Instagram's format of the stories as a media for her art and political statements. © Celin Jiang, 2022

Definitions

Etymologically (technè), any digital practice is an art. As a movement, we can't be satisfied with that.

Art

To claim to be able to define art is undoubtedly an imposture but, to build my subject, I will start from art as a process composed of fundamental stages. These definitions are to be taken in the most abstract sense in order to include the less "material" forms of art like poetry.

Globally, the artistic process breaks down as follows:

– Gesture: research then expression of an intention, an idea, representations in a work. The gesture can also be collective, which supposes means of organization.

– Medium: support of a work by addition, modelling or subtraction of matter.

– Monstration: exhibition of a work in a situated and codified space-time.

– Reception, interaction: effect, senses, emotions, feelings and subjective returns in front of a work - free interpretation of a free gesture.

As such, the artistic process is not out of the world, it is crossed by the conditions of its emergence, that of the society in which it takes place.

Digital

Literally, "digital" means above all data: transcription of human signs into machine code, in the form of binary numbers. Computer science allows the electronic processing of these data and their networking.

To speak only about "digital" reduces data processing to its product. The digital is a matter treated by a system, itself being a social construction, in this case: a capitalist, colonial, sexist infrastructure... (cf. Donna Haraway, *Cyborg Manifesto*)

Digital Art

By simple combination of terms, one can define the digital art by the use of the computer to accomplish the whole of the stages of the artistic process. The computer science as medium, or rather as *media*, in the plural sense of the *medium*.

The computer science being itself the industrial product of a set of techniques, of supports, the digital art supposes as many intermediaries between the gesture and the matter, between the matter and its reception: accessories, cables, printed circuits, processors, software... So many intermediaries which make of the digital art an essentially *multimedia* art, even for the simple textual poetry. I thus confuse digital art and multimedia art.

⁚⁚ Creative and cultural industries ⁚⁚

These definitions situate digital art as a « creative and cultural industry ». Behind this unappetizing expression and a priori shifted of the idea of art in the most "noble" or free sense, is in fact a certain part of reality, whatever the initial intention. More than any other art because of its technological complexity, digital art is an industrial product.

The Society of the Spectacle 2 : *reloaded*

Continuing Adorno's critique of the cultural industry, Guy Debord showed in 1967 in *The Society of the Spectacle* how capitalism was taking over all aspects of our lives and how to subvert it. He opened his speech by diverting the introductory sentence of the *Capital* of Marx: "All the life of the societies in which reign the modern conditions of production announces itself as an immense accumulation of *spectacles*. He conceives there, at the time when the television was still in black & white, the spectacle as mode of production-reproduction of goods, the society of consumption. He also presents it as "a social relationship between people, mediated by images" where "the true is a moment of the false".

55 years later, it's hard not to think of some apps or AI when reading this. Today, in turn, we could replace the term *spectacle* with *publicity*. Indeed, digital reproduction has replaced mechanical reproduction: no more need for production lines or workers to reproduce a work and distribute it; the work is separated from the creator by himself through the *cloud*, agglomerated in the Big Data. Once the prototype or the final result is published on an online service, its reproduction/distribution only costs the capitalist the maintenance

costs of an outsourced infrastructure. Multinationals can therefore offer "free" storage and file-sharing spaces, largely paid for by the sale of advertising space among all the creations published and enhanced by the learning of AIs.

In the worldwide Activity and Commercial Zone that is the Internet, even the mentions "sponsored" or "suggested" no longer make it possible to distinguish a personal creation from a commercial advertisement, since the individuals themselves, who are in competition with each other, must henceforth make their own publicity in order to survive.

The cybercafé as a digital museum: this is what the artist Aram Bartholl proposes in the collaborative installation *Speed Show: Face the Face*. He invites digital artists who wish to do so to exhibit their works online and curators to take over the device in their turn. The form of the cybercafé illustrates the commercial aspect of the net and computer science despite an intention of radical artistic freedom.
CC BY-NC-SA Aram Bartholl, 2019

Whether we are artists or not, we are encouraged to use digital advertising to meet all our needs and desires: to communicate with our entourage, to work, to be entertained, to pay for our food... to each task its (meta)data transmitted, more or less voluntarily. So much data systematically analyzed, cross-checked, agglomerated in global flows to maximize private profits and train *machine learning* algorithms (automatic learning of "AI").

Alienation of art, from gesture to reception

At all stages of the artistic process, the artist depends on a set of industrial products and services for his production. Examples cited in the room: proprietary software like the Adobe suite; "premium" software like Picsart... Photography is also cited, even silver, because it is also caught in the same type of dependencies: film, cameras, paper, etc.

The format is an omnipresent constraint in the digital world: from the file format to the interaction, passing obviously by the monstration. This issue is particularly striking on Instagram, which is nonetheless now considered a mandatory platform for showing one's work as an artist. Instagram is also a good place to talk about the notion of canon, which runs through the history of art as an aesthetic benchmark. Codes were until recently built by public or private art institutions, already ideologically or commercially influenced. On Instagram, they are now produced by probabilistic algorithms to optimize results, in a pure marketing approach. The capitalist digital platforms hold today a power to build canons by automated learning, not to say artificial intelligence (AI).

8

Last step of the artistic experience, the reception is again alienated by the industry: the feelings and interactions aroused by a work are quantified (*emoji* reactions) to contribute to the ranking mechanism. The display algorithm (*timeline*) programs the exposure of the different contents according to the spectators in order to maximize the time spent on the application by favoring an emotional balance, with the help of neuropsychologists..

Bisou Magique 茜茜's *My Best Emotions, Hard Discount of (#Self) Love* project is a materialized hyperbole of the commodification of affect and the diversity of identities in the digital space. © Celin Jiang

The question of what emotions are actually felt on Instagram arises beyond the reactions offered by the interface. The audience's responses to this question illustrate the emotional alienation of the artistic experience induced by the medium itself. People in the room cite: stress, frustration, jealousy, laziness, pressure, competition... A psychological experience consistent with the reality of the injunctions,

despite the efforts to hide the real objectives: maximizing the productivity of the system and the consumption of customers for more profitability.

With Sugar Walls Teardom, artist and performer Tabita Rézaire invites us to a meditation session in homage to enslaved women who were sexually tortured by a surgeon as "research". By inviting the viewer to sit in a gynecological chair to watch a video, the installation allows for an "embodiment" of the history of racialized and gendered medical violence, as well as the hypocrisy of the "sciences of care" that use restraint and manipulation to control bodies. © Tabita Rezaire

From Tool to Service

A common retort to criticism of capitalist platforms is to say "it's true that it sucks, but I'm just using it as a tool. But this sentence illustrates a fundamental confusion in terms. A tool can be owned, manipulated freely: a hammer can be used to drive or remove a nail, uncap a bottle, break a window, hit someone, be repaired or modified, be shared, lent or given away, rented or sold... To own a tool and make it available is to offer a service granted according to its own terms.

Commercial online services require the approval of their terms of use. This contract specifies in particular all that is likely to interrupt the service: non-respect of the rules of use, technical malfunction, unilateral decision, absence or delay of payment... It also stipulates the terms of use of the published contents, which corresponds in fact to a license granted to its creations.

Computers can generally be used without limit as long as they do not require a software update and as long as their repair does not require to go through a specific provider. When using a computer, one often realizes that the reality is more complex: one sometimes finds oneself unable to use an obsolete one, due to the lack of available updates; one cannot repair it without going through the manufacturer; modifying or repairing it oneself breaks the warranty... Commercial software (called proprietary because of its exclusive license) for creating and editing documents, images or sound could possibly be considered as tools if, once installed, all its functionalities can be used without limit. Because of the exclusivity of certain file formats, however, they often make creations captive to the software in question: one cannot then change software to continue a work begun

on the previous one. A painter would be scandalized not to be able to change brushes to continue a painting...

Since the 2010s, more and more software is adopting the *Software as a Service* (SaaS) model, in the form of native or web applications: instead of buying a single license to use a software at will, a monthly subscription is required to benefit from all the functionalities or to save files in the cloud. Without payment, some features are disabled and thus prevent from continuing to work on one's own content.

The computer industry has thus transformed artists into dependent users of commercial services, dispossessing them of rights that are fundamental to any free artistic practice, while exploiting their work to breed AI. The competition, the injunction to overproductivity by the precariousness of the artists keep us captive of the capitalist domination. In fact, many digital creations are today only accessible on Instagram. It also happens that, for lack of payment of a subscription to online services, an entire website disappears overnight.

If art is about producing financial assets in the form of cultural artifacts, then yes, there is digital art and lots of it. Since a culture is defined by the whole of what is shared by a group of individuals, our cultures are progressively crystallizing into infrastructures, as our data is collected and ingested.

Intellectual property

The ease of duplication and transmission of data, however, has concerned capitalists who seek scarcity as the primary value of a commodity. In response, *Non Fungible Tokens* (NFTs) have taken advantage of the *blockchain* technology (mainly developed for *crypto-*

currencies) to virtualize the function of notaries and simulate certificates of authenticity. Without any legal value or real efficiency (the files as such remain duplicable at will), this scam has lasted as long as the handspinners fashion.

In the performance *The opportunity of the century!? 4 ways to invest in metavers! To become a millionaire*, artist-researchers Loréna Lisembard and Hortense Boulais-Ifrène propose a stroll through cyberspaces or metavers deserted by users, where only promises of a "future" remain.© Loréna Lisembard, Hortense Boulais-Ifrène, 2022

Although materially inoperative, the NFTs respond to an obsession for exclusive private property: the desire to be the sole owner of a work, a structure, a piece of land. This right to private property is an essential foundation of capitalism. It allows to accumulate goods and to exploit them in order to make profit. It was first limited to territories and material goods, to humans (*slavery*) and animals (*breeding*), since its appearance during prehistory. With the advent of the printing press in

the 17th century, France and the United Kingdom created the first legislation concerning *copyright*. This was the first element of what is today intellectual property with patent law, trademark law, design law and moral rights. The latter is the only one that the author cannot transfer.

Contrary to what their name implies, copyright was not created by authors but by publishers to assert a right to reproduce a work. By a contract of assignment of rights, the artist can give up all or part of his rights to the benefit of publishers or other third parties. This regime has accompanied the history of the industrialization of art in the West, allowing the constitution of more and more powerful capitalist enterprises that benefit from the rent derived from successful works. Today, the exponential multiplication of the generative capacities of AIs proves that these "rights" do not prevent the industry from exploiting the creativity of artists to automate their work.

Digital art at the service of capitalism

With the tools that have become services and the regime of intellectual property, this predation of artistic creation by capitalism has been reinforced as digital technologies have evolved. The advertising of works on the internet according to imposed conditions and the exploitation of their reception make artists producers of contents in their data factory, ingested en masse by *generative AIs*. Today, the main computer companies are the first financial capitalizations in the world, before those of the energy industry. From the point of view of capitalists, control of digital data is therefore more valuable and profitable than control of oil.

This value placed on the control of digital data is a direct result of the power it represents. The stock market value of these companies has increased at the same rate as the computerization of the world: it seems unthinkable today for a city to be instantly cut off from all internet connections without causing major dysfunction. In fact, states have become dependent on digital companies, even though they are theoretically in charge of regulating them.

This power is not enough to satisfy the appetite of capitalism, so much so that several bosses of computer empires (Jeff Bezos, Elon Musk…) and a good number of investors claim to follow the libertarian ideology. This current of thought, supposedly stemming from anarchism, aims at the disappearance of states in order to put an end to laws and taxes that "limit" the rights of enterprise and private property: labor rights, trade and competition rights, inheritance rights… The use of capitalist services is thus a submission to a political order that ultimately aims at privatizing the entire society. As an artist, any work published on a capitalist platform is also a form of advertising for the system itself in that it encourages viewers to join or remain in it in order to gain access.

> *« Form and content of the show are identically the total justification of the conditions and ends of the existing system»* Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*

Form and content of the *publicity* are identically the total justification of the conditions and purposes of the existing system.

A photo shared on Mastodon by an anarchist account showing a food delivery man in a wheelchair.

Emancipation, changing software

The artist in the class struggle

In the market society and from a materialist point of view, the artistic creation is a work, which can situate the artist on the plan of the class between *proletarian* (worker without other mode of subsistence that its force of work), *petty-bourgeois* (entrepreneur, owner of its tool of work and its intellectual property) or *bourgeois* (employer owner of tools of production).

In the class struggle, the main strength of the proletarians to emancipate themselves from the bourgeois domination lies in their capacity of organization to take the control of the tools of work, legally or not (strike, blocking, occupation, sabotage, theft/expropriation, cooperation…). The petty-bourgeois class is materially closer to the proletariat because of the precariousness of its situation, but, unless it is class-conscious, its aspirations aim at joining the bourgeoisie. Finally, the bourgeoisie dominates the whole by the ownership of the capital.

Concretely, the digital artists whose survival depends on public or private orders, subsidies or patronage are proletarians exploited by the bosses of industry, notably digital by the control of tools and systems, and the public sponsors to reproduce the existing system (the society of the spectacle). To be aware of being part of this class is the first step of a global revolutionary emancipation aiming at putting an end to the exploitation of the whole planet for the profit of a single class.

Emancipatory digital arts practices

An already popular practice of digital art emancipation is **cracking** capitalist creative software. At the conference, when asked "who has never cracked software?", 3 out of 30 hands went up and one person answered that they had not. When the question was asked again: « who has never cracked or had software cracked? », no more hands went up. I see this practice as emancipatory despite all its limitations, a minimal measure of social justice. Other problems remain with even cracked software: specific (proprietary) file formats, difficulty to update despite incompatibilities between versions, illegality... And this should not prevent us from giving money to independent workers if we benefit from their work.

In order to avoid the monopolization of creations by rich companies and against a very restrictive intellectual property law by default in most parts of the world, ingenious anti-capitalist lawyers have written **free licenses** whose terms cancel the fundamental principles of copyright.

More confidential to the "general public" than commercial software, **free (libre) software** allows a return to the notion of a tool: its licenses guarantee freedom of use, study, modification and sharing. Free software intended to be installed on servers allows them to be made available as **collective, self-managed, cooperative, open, free or solidarity-based services** (see https://chatons.org). Conceived in cooperation, they represent a possibility of free *occupation* of a productive/creative apparatus which is itself captive of the industry (Windows, OS X). It is even possible to install separately or even replace the whole operating system by a **libre system** such as Linux (Linux Mint, Nitrux).

To allow a free reuse of one's own work by other artists, in a logic of *popular culture*, it is possible to publish one's works under a free license. There are many of them, with some specificities:

– *copyleft* free licenses (Free Art licenses, Creative Commons BY-SA) prohibit derivative works from not being licensed under compatible licenses and from not citing the original authors;

– *free distribution* licenses (CC BY-ND, BY-NC, BY-NC-SA, BY-NC-ND) allow distribution but prohibit certain uses or modifications;

– *non-copyleft* free licenses (CC0) allow any re-use without any conditions;

Some of these licenses do not prevent commercial use of the work in question and thus a form of capitalist exploitation, hence the existence of the Creative Commons Non-Commercial licenses (CC BY-NC, BY-NC-SA, BY-NC-ND). That said, even strict copyright does not prevent inspiration (including automated inspiration) or even plagiarism. The law does not prevent anything, but at best allows one to defend oneself. These licenses represent in any case possibilities of creation emancipated from the logic of exclusive appropriation of ideas. On the contrary, they promote a culture of the commons that values work rather than accumulation and the market: paying for the concert of a group whose albums have been pirated is much more remunerative for the artist than streaming them 50 times.
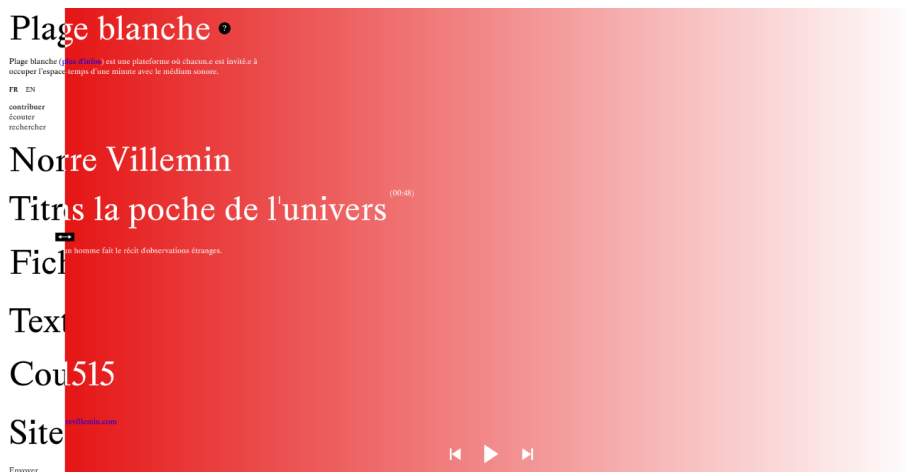
On the *Plage Blanche* website, artist Marine Froeliger and graphic designer Marjorie Ober propose to anyone who wishes to publish a short sound creation under the free CC BY-SA license. Devoid of any other commercial approach and published itself as free software, this "platform" is a free and open space for monstration, whose technical constraints of format have been exclusively decided by artists.

The interpretation in the physical space of ***live performances*** is a form of technological emancipation by its quasi-immediacy between the intention and the interaction by the public, by its vulnerability to the unforeseen and to the pre-eminence of the body over the machines.

The practices of ***hacking*** in the sense of *misappropriation* or *tweaking* can be applied to any object, digital or not: using waste as creative material or even instrument, tool or support; intervention on existing sites or platforms; wild recovery (***scrapping***) of online data in order to archive them...

Under the pseudonym Papirové Houby, the artist Cécile Fleur Dabo performs concrete music concerts in the form of livecoding performances, where recordings of sounds and voices are mixed on the themes of wood, metal, water and the planet. The video projection of the artist's screen is an aesthetic code specific to the cyberpunk livecoding scene. On hers, one can visualize the waveforms produced by the software.

The publication on **DIY websites** (*small web*, *cybershacks*, *Static Site Generators* or libre *Content Management Systems*) allows to define oneself or in collective the conditions of display of one's own works.

The presence on **federated free social networks** (Mastodon, PeerTube, PixelFed...) allows to meet other people sharing the same praxis, a common thought or practices. Some tools and resources facilitate the migration to and out of these networks, to acquire the cultural codes specific to them.

So much **autonomous know-how** to share in order to contribute to rebuild a popular culture freed from capitalist domination. Combinations of intentions, tools, supports, spaces and interactions with the public: innumerable possibilities of emancipated and even emancipating digital art remain to be created.
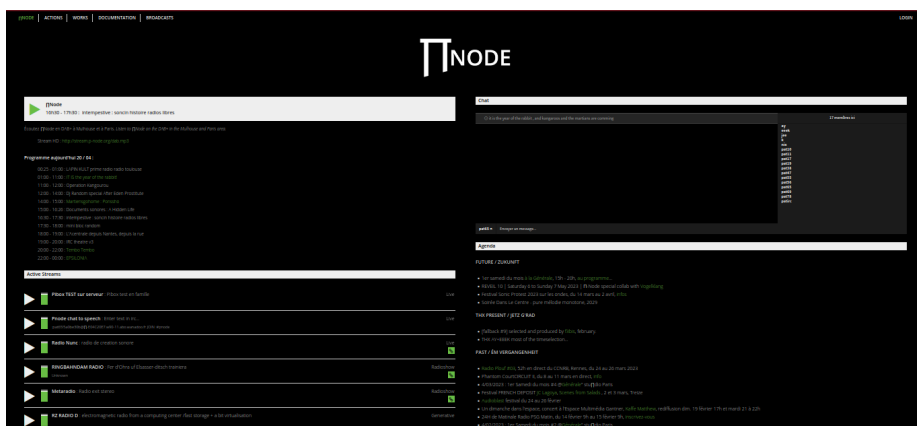
The pirate radio collective Π-Node's website is also a tool in itself with its live stream mixer and a chat room for organizing.

Constraints of emancipation

The question was posed to the audience, "What limitations keep you away from free alternatives?" Defects in performance or interface design, difficulty of access, lack of visibility/communication were cited. Despite great efforts and improvements in recent years, some of these difficulties remain. Constraint being part of any creative process, it is important to note that all these difficulties can also be perceived as stimulating, solvable thanks to a little ingenuity, and encourage mutual aid and contribution within communities, especially in *hackerspaces*. We can also regret the lack of popularity compared to the hegemonic platforms, but we can be happy to meet communities that are very active, committed and enthusiastic.

By acquiring a free culture, one discovers more and more things, including including the extent of the political issues raised by the raised by digital technology. Even if it is not necessarily not necessarily desirable to create free alternatives to all capitalist capitalist platforms, there are still many areas to contribute to to contribute to in order to have viable substitutes. And no matter what software and the software and tactics that can be put in place, the internet infrastructure itself is still owned by undesirable undesirable multinationals, which leaves a lot of room for imagination to envision the organization necessary to regain to take back complete control. So, the possibility remains to to prepare for its downfall in order to get out of it as well as possible, that is, to learn to function without their services: **train our collective intelligence rather than their artificial intelligence**.

So, digital art or no digital art?

On the eve of the *Chthulucene*, the age of monsters, according to Donna Haraway, the computerization of domination represents the apogee of the myth of the dialectics human-machine, nature-culture, human-animal, woman-man. To challenge these arbitrary dichotomies is, according to her, a revolutionary thought: by considering their uniqueness, we also think of the digital as an extension of a living environment in which our cyborg existences fight against capitalist, sexist and racist domination.

The installation *WannaCry (Weeping Angels)* by Aram Bartholl illustrates the complicity of the advertising industry with the military-industrial complex to serve liberticidal and even murderous security and migration policies.
CC BY-NC-SA Aram Bartholl, 2017

As paradoxical as it may be, digital art has a particularly powerful creative potential as a medium as total as live performance. But as a potential combination or even simple technological extension of all the other arts, there is no such thing as digital art.

The technological emancipation of the art requires above all a confrontation with its own materiality then a practical effort of collective re-appropriation of the conditions of expression and sharing. It is only thus that we will be able to find, beyond the art, a living agentivity and a freedom, by or out of what will remain perhaps the ultimate artistic medium of our civilization.

Resources

Iconography

Bisou Magique : instagram.com/bis0u.magiqu3
Aram Bartholl : arambartholl.com
Tabita Rézaire : tabitarezaire.com
Marjorie Ober : marjorieober.com
Loréna Lisembard : lorenalisembard.com
Π-Node : p-node.org

Toolery

Hackstub's list of resources: hackstub.eu/home/fr/resources
Alternatives to commercial softwares: framalibre.org/alternatives
Open Source Publishing: osp.kitchen
Libre Typographic Foundery (Velvetyne): velvetyne.fr
Copyleft design (Ultra Éditions) : ressources.editions-ultra.org
Free Art License: artlibre.org/category/textes/

Bibliography

A Cyborg Manifesto, Donna Haraway
The Society of the Spectacle, Guy Debord
The Hacker Ethic and the Information Age, Pekka Himanen
The Age of Surveillance Capitalism, Shoshana Zuboff

Other

La mort de l'art – Les chemins de la philosophie, Adèle Van Reeth (FR)
La Bataille du Libre, Philippe Borel (FR)

Talk for the Compagnie des lundis, HEAR Strasbourg, april 11th 2023

From the creative gesture to the interaction with the spectators, digital art is intrinsically part of the capitalist production mode. Which practices can allow its emancipation out of the « creative and cultural industries »?

Half-body/half-wave, Ada LaNerd is more undisciplined proletarian than transdisciplinary artist. She is an activist within the Hackstub hackerspace, and is interested in the intersection between arts, sciences and politics.