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Machine Creativity in Terms of Detachment, Withdrawal, and Renunciation

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ABSTRACT

This paper argues that the ongoing debate on artificial creativity has largely overlooked the passive component of creation. The study questions the discussion of inventiveness merely as an act resulting in multiplication of artefacts, ideas and methods. Alternatively, it suggests expanding the artificial creativity discourse to include concepts of detachment, withdrawal, and renunciation. The proposed approach implies that an artificial system's creativity may arise from the withholding of movement or an energy flow reversion. Renunciation of routine activities and detachment from the external environment resulting from those processes can be accomplished either by a reflexive subject or a machine. To envisage how artificial creativity programmes could profit from exploration of the passive aspects of creativity, the paper reviews manifestos, artistic interventions and blueprints that test the technical domain on its completeness, limitations and self- sufficiency. The discussed examples of artistic interventions into the technical sphere come from artists such as !Mediengruppe Bitnik, *Guido* Segni, Sam Lavigne and John F Simon, together with the critical essays of Timothy J. Clark, McKenzie Wark and Silvio Lorusso. The paper looks at renunciation patterns and artistic interventions as if they were games played either by human or non-human actors. The text reconstructs the roles behind the scripts and the mythologies of technicity in order to infer how non-actual is used in human-machine relation. The study provides a set of arguments for those who discuss alternatives to AI or artificial creativity projects.

KEYWORDS

artificial creativity, AI art, renunciation, withdrawal, interventions, philosophy of technology, machines

Introduction

Voices in contemporary debates on AI art and generative design (Du Sautoy; Miller) tend to regard creation merely in terms of the Aristotelian transformation of potentiality into actuality (Abel 67). While invention is considered as an act that either reconfigures or supplements the environment with novel, surprising elements (Boden), the withdrawal or renunciation of existing worldviews decrees that violation are still a gloss in a historically experienced philosopher's account (Abel 57). By locating creativity on positivist ground, visions of human/machine interrelation remain anchored in the mythology of neo-liberal growth economy (Zylinska 75-87). A contemporary study of "creative renunciation", to use Simone's Weil theology imbued term (Palaver 145-147), demands a rethinking of the myth of the relentless machine both on a technical and a social plane. The creative potential of retreat, detachement or withdrawal, which used to be recognised as part of a subversive strategy, has lately gained some deserved attention as a constructive component, not only of artistic, but also of political, economic and technological relations (McGranahan; Lorena; O'Murchú). Bearing this in mind, I endeavour to explore how renunciation can be integrated into mechanical systems.

In the following paragraphs I consider artificial creativity merely as a programme for technoculture outlined by authors like Margaret Boden (Boden); popularised recently in Marcus Du Sautoy, Arthur I. Miller; promoted by the tech corporate industry; presented to the general public during a series of AI art festivals; debated and criticised in studies of: Lev Manovich, Andreas Broeckmann, Joanna Zylinska. Definitions of creativity to which I refer are derived from Teresa M. Amabile (33) and Günter Abel (57 footnote 1). The following proposition is inspired by performative theories relating to the production of knowledge understood in terms of an act rather than a representation. I narrow down my enquiry to performances and scenarios because my aim is to work with the most basic definitions of invention or ingenuity so that the complementary concepts can be well integrated into the creativity discourse.

In the first part of this essay, I review theoretical inquiries and manifestoes pointing to the transformation of the social sphere through the abandonment of toxic, repetitive, or troublesome actions. In the second part I demonstrate how these postulates resonate within creative environments. I review artistic interventions into technicity and show how artists tend to position humans and machines in extreme situations, at the same time referencing examples of machine creativity projects and analysing these in terms of restless action. This is to see if artificial systems could be embedded in the scenarios of the game of creation. Finally, I return to the discussion on artificial creativity and show how renunciative machinery could be used to revise the nature and range of artistic vision of artificially intelligent futures.

Renunciation Patterns

Voices presenting withdrawal as a potentially creative strategy appear in recent anthropological theorisations of refusal (McGranahan, 319-325). Outlining the

refusal studies program Carole McGranahan considers that refusal marks the point of a limit being reached and understands it as a strategic move which redirects levels of engagement. The theorisation states, the strategy lays claim to the sociality that underlines relationships, primarily those of a political nature. Collection or papers introduced by McGranahan has accentuated the affiliative and creative aspects of refusal as a strategy that strengthens social relations, enable meaningful affiliation and is "insistence on the possible over the probable", and thus in Isabelle Stengers's terms, is aligned with hope (McGranahan 322, 323)

McGranahan's theorisation has been adopted in a *For Refusal* manifesto issued by the Berlin Transmediale Festival of digital culture ("For Refusal"; Lorena, O'Murchú). The introduction to the 2021 edition proposes three perspectives for taking refusal into consideration. These are: friction, scale and entanglement. Friction is the perspective focused on explaining refusal as a power that reconfigures political relations by introducing irrelevance, uncertainty and contradiction: "By manifesting in diverse and sometimes oppositional activities, blurring their practices and values, refusal has the capacity to generate friction and to polarise positions" ("For Refusal"). This discordant quality of refusal is further balanced by its entanglement. The entanglement perspective explains the role that refusal can play: "moving beyond an understanding of refusal as a no or an exit" and states that refusal "can develop new practices and values, building momentum for the creation of more equitable futures" ("For Refusal").

Calling for the acknowledgement of denial in the fields of finance, environment and technology, the Transmediale manifesto does not specify that repetitive algorithmic activities are the subject of refusal. However, it is not an image of Taylor's production line that could illustrate the critique. It is not valuable anymore to call for the Revolution that would destroy factories, production lines and banks in one blow. Instead, the manifesto implies that to gain power the refusal needs to be repetitive: "Through a continuous process of rejection and reassembly of relations between finance, technology, subjectivity, and the environment, refusal can bring new settings and concerns into focus" ("For Refusal"). This refers to the third perspective – scalability. Here, "small or quiet forms of refusal cater to different capacities and abilities" ("For Refusal"). Inspired by such a contemporary postulate which ponders on micro gestures, endorsing continuously abandoned and reassembled orders, we can begin to develop a new pattern for renunciation. Because a call "for refusal" can be understood as implying "re-enunciation". Such re-enunciation would be reflexive and peri-systemic rather than anti-system and primarily no longer a one-time gesture, gaining power through repetition.

Another, quite distinctive renunciation pattern has been explored by authors from the Situationist circle. They see labour and idleness as interlacing in utopian, anarchic ideologies. Renunciation of daily duties derives its gravity from, and is well inscribed in traditional social structures. For the same reason it has been banned from disenchanted modernity. In his paragraphs on anarchism and pastoral themes T.J. Clark explains: "Idleness is ultimately a political matter. Pastoral is a dream of time – of leisure sewn into exertion, snatched from it easily, threaded through the rhythms of labour and

insinuating their tempos and imperatives into the working day. I did say a dream" (Clark 70). Clark's account of idleness is well illustrated by Camille Pissarro's "Two Young Peasant Women," which is the artist's major painting first shown during his retrospective in 1892. Bathed in vibrant sunlight, two women recline chatting lazily. The viewer's attention is gripped by the rift formed by their figures filling the foreground. As the women engage in interaction, a field, an orchard and cultivated ground all quietly await the labourers' return.

Clark reads Pissaro's images of idleness as manifestos of a political nature. He links the painting with a contemporary passage from par Élisée Reclus, a pamphlet of the 1890 *À Mon frère le paysan*. The anarchist, friend of the painter, is alert to the dangerous capacities of machines as an elemental force "They are going to take the fields and harvests from you, they will take your very self from you, they will tie you to some machine of iron, smoking and strident, and surrounded by coalsmoke" (70). He warns that the machine will disrupt the natural rhythm of labour and idleness, as "you will have to put your hand to a piston ten or twelve thousand times a day. That is what they will call agriculture. And don't expect to make love then when your heart tells you to take a woman; don't turn your head towards the young girl passing by" (70). He draws our attention to the comforting power of interruption, with surprise and pleasure: "there will be no women and children coming to interrupt toil with a kiss or caress. The workers will be drawn up in squadrons, with sergeants and captains and the inevitable informer." Adding to the reflections on the anarchic perceptions, McKenzie Wark argues that Pisarro's images of anarchy were in the spirit of the First International (1864–1876) (Wark 41). In his account, renunciation inherent in everyday labour – irregular, pleasure-giving – belongs to some archaic neglected order of socialism. Therefore, the sensual anarchy of peasants became disparate from the militant rage of the proletariat acclaimed during the Second International (1889-1916) and the systemic machinery of Leninism (1919-1943). The Situationists call for reintegration of desire and pleasure into social life. In this account, idleness belongs to some archaic world formed by the agricultural pre-industrialised civilisation. Machine and human relations are antagonistic. In this scenario individuals can't cease to work because a reckless machine needs their constant attendance.

Moving away from the postulates for individual reflexive refusals, one encounters some socially normalised forms of rejection. Sanctionary techniques such as consumer boycotts or contemporary variants of cancel culture (political, ecological etc.) emerge regularly against specific social ideologies and viewpoints. A well-organized boycott campaign would use distinguishable slogans, produce its own iconography, and provide clear instructions on how to participate. Like a cancel culture campaign that calls for a "flight free year" (Saner) or a generic consumer boycott would aim to control social behaviour, with the promise of re-entry into a commercial relationship after their postulates are satisfied. Interaction synergy makes cancel culture distinct from Pisarro's vision of women abandoning their daily duties for no apparent reason. A Situationist like Raoul Vaneigem would suggest that renunciation should be practiced for the sake of pleasure. A boycott renouncement is neither pleasure-driven nor anarchic: it is system-compliant.

System-compliant sanctioning techniques are more about reflex than reflexivity. While boycotting being often recognized as rooted in the ethos of liberalism and individualism specific to the culture of the global North (Friedman; Bozonnet) withholding esteem or financial support from a player who has violated the social rules is discussed by scholars seeking to explain the mechanisms of third-party enforcement of cooperation. In the legal-economic literature mechanisms underlying boycotts can be described in terms of game theory as a "repeated prisoners dilemma" (Mahoney and Sanchirico 1295-1297; Zhang 145-147). Debaters on second order collective action problem argue that horizontal agreements on negative sanctions such as withholding esteem for a product or a person is an efficient third party punishment imposed by the players oriented toward future cooperation (McAdams 366-375). This game-planned nature of cancel culture and boycotting is another point that differentiates them from anarchic incidents described in Situationist manifestos or anthropological accounts on constructive refusal.

Continuing from reflexive to reflex, from individual refusals to collective boycotts, we find patterns which suddenly gravitate towards acts that seem to be the opposite of what may be regarded as intentional gestures. These acts rely on instrumental renunciation – a halt which amounts to a simple stop executed according to a predefined rule, a cut executed on time. The banality of these scenarios makes them look as if they have been untainted by ideology, and, even if this were so, aren't we all aware that not crossing at the empty junction before the lights change, or not leaving the production line before the shift ends, is a legacy of the discipline training which Michel Foucault has lectured on. Nonetheless, such a halt is interesting in terms of creativity because it blurs the division between reflexive and reactive, human and machine. Ubiquitous stop procedures are both adapted by and applied to creative activities. From Vertov showing an alarm clock as an icon of modernity, through Kaprow's ringing the bell at Reuben Gallery, modernity has made us the masters of pre-programmed retreat.

At its height, automated refusal may become an efficiency tool. In an ironic essay on productivity apps, Silvio Lorusso has exposed the anxiety threatening entrepreneurs of neoliberal economy: "today we quantify our spare time adopting the same logic that informs the tools used during work time" (*Lorusso*). He argues that productivity has become the point of reference, a parameter for every type of human activity. To elaborate on this issue the artist has distributed a sticker which says: "shouldn't you be working?" and could be applied freely both within and beyond working zones. Lorusso has copied the phrase from a productivity plug-in that pops-up a warning on a user's screen if their somnambulistic page scrolling took too long. Distributed in restrooms, kitchens and on public transport, the productivity meme claims attention anytime, anywhere. Eventually, this efficiency rush forms a pair with the stop button. Once productivity infiltrates every aspect of life, an automated stop might be the only safety switch left.

Anarchic, reflexive, organised into a consumer boycott or pre-programmed, we become aware that these calls echo one another. If you add some reflexiveness to anarchic peasants it takes you straight into the camp of the

refusal anthropology debaters. Take away their reflexiveness and you are part of militant cancel culture. Move from pre-planned, algorithmic boycott to automated signals and the stop light becomes your rescue from the neo-liberal race of productivity. Eventually, you internalise halting patterns, rely on your drives and re-enter the pastoral area of Situationist writings. Circumambulation of course makes a nice rhetorical figure, but perhaps there is a little more to it than that. Once we follow narrations discussed above, step by step we begin to sense that the transformative power of rejection does not depend on humans or machines, intentional or reflexive gestures – it operates on the meta level, redirects flows of energy and information, and evolves in time.

Machine Mythologies

Machine mythologies are built around notions of alienation and endurance. Technical ensembles can be conceptualised as antagonistic to humans, operating regardless of social constraints and scales, and thus unknowable and nature-like (Broeckmann "Robots versus Machines"; Broeckmann "The Machine as Artist as Myth"). Mythologies claim that a technical systems (either machines or robots) must not stop working; it is its raison d'être (Ford 194-196). This supposition proves to be powerful enough to make researchers of machine ethics hypothesise that when choices between ethically desirable and active behaviour are to be evaluated we tend to judge machines according to different standards than humans. This was the conclusion of a research project which tested "a trolley dilemma" with two variants (*Malle*). One gave a human actor decision-making power to decide whether a trolley route should be manipulated so that many lives can be saved rather than one; the other delegated that decision to a mechanical system. The outcomes of the experiment suggest that we expect machines to act even if we consider them to be making wrong decisions, while we let humans withdraw from an action where the consequences are morally dubious.

In the art domain, the association of machines with activeness lays the foundation for basic scenarios of technical system detour. Self-destructing sculptures, glitched films or obsolete systems are testimony to the irreverence of techno-ideologies. Some artists recklessly expose technical alienation by running systems that are understandable only in machine scale. This was the case of John Simon Jr.'s *Every Icon*. The piece was presented in Sean Cubitt's essay as a textbook exemplification of digital aesthetics (Cubitt). *Every Icon* is a grid onto which a program flickers every combination of black and white points possible. It will take 10,298 years to draw every icon on a canvas measuring 32 x 32 pixels (Simon).

Some artists use technical systems to practice idiosyncratic forms of abandonment. For example, the works of Guido Segni fuse anarchic withdrawal with productivity rush (Segni). Announcing "performative resting" under a "Demand Full Laziness Five Years Plan 2018-2023" red flag, the artist ceased his professional duties. During the first year of this durational performance Segni trained AI to produce his portraits while he lay on a sofa, slept, or ate dinner. This somewhat physiocratic model of digital labour is linked to the practice of fundraising and social media platforms. Automated

banking and communication systems contribute to the successful pursuit of the Plan. Another example comes from recent works by !Mediengruppe Bitnik.

Responding to the Transmediale programme, these artists have released a web browser plug-in, "refuse to be human" (Weisskopf; Smoljo). Having installed it the user retreats from her or his "privilege" to interact with the web content providers as a human. What one gets in exchange is the status of the Yandex search engine bot. The change of status reveals unexpected trade-offs. Freed of human identity, one could be gate-kept by captcha but free to enter paywalled libraries and scroll news with no flicking and distracting adverts. Playing a game that reverses the Turing test, Bitnik lets the curious individual peep into an infrastructure made for machines. Surprisingly, the bot-internet can turn out to be quite comfortable and well-suited to human scale. Bearing all that in mind, one can argue that in the cases mentioned above, technical systems are real time controlled by humans. Furthermore, systems do not slow down, block or halt any other actors. Renouncing customary definitions of labour, raising funds for performative resting and reversing Turing tests are all transformative gestures. However, it is the human who instigates retreat and renounce, not an artificial agent. It is possible to respond to this argument by referring to projects where a maker would set one technical system against another. Sam Lavigne's "Slow Hot Computer website" is one good example (Lavigne). It decreases CPU performance by making it overheat with computationally exerting tasks. Lavigne's project is an ironical response to efficiency hype and may be effective as a safety switch for an exhausted user. Although setting systems against each other is a weak strategy – it results in a retreat rather than renunciation - one should agree that the method emphasises and favours a passive component of artificial system performance.

"Slow Hot Computer website" makes an interesting case for discussion on passive creativity, not only because it lavishly demonstrates how a virus-like program can slow down a hectic user but because it is a reminder that we use devices with limited capacity. Since the limited capacity of a system can lead to such undesirable effects as hardware overheating or program freezing, competent designers do their best to avoid it. However, if a response to data overload is handled as an integral part of the system's performance, one can conceive of a machine that ceases to work, shies away from, slows down, or rejects tasks beyond its scale – all for a very deliberate reason. Making response to data overload a part of performance has been practiced in pioneering computer art projects. Edward Ihnatowicz introduced a characteristic retreat into the interaction pattern of Senster – a large cybernetic sculpture controlled by a mainframe computer. From the spectator's point of view, retreat looked as if the heavy animalesque form could suddenly shy away startled by noise or an expressive gesture. An exploration of Ihnatowicz's correspondence shows that the mode had not been programmed to make the arm's movement more varied. The retreat has been introduced in case signals collected by the sensors mounted on the top of the arm could not be processed by the mainframe on the fly. These examples of works by Lavigne and Ihnatowicz suggest that playing with the systems' limitations may result in patterns that push the boundaries of system engineering.

Continuing our deliberation on the creative potential of pre-programmed systems, it is necessary to examine halting patterns in the context of generative art. In its relatively long tradition, generative art and design has used either modular, parametric and machine learning approaches while dealing with questions of when to terminate the design process. Defining halting criteria for the program has always been a substantive part of such methods. However, discourse on generative art has hardly ever looked at this issue in any depth. On the contrary, generative art and design made its name by boasting about the countless variants of works it could produce. Initially, this promise (or threat) was restrained by limited computing powers. This is illustrated by a technical description of Harald Cohen's AARON which states: "the most recent version was written under UNIX on a MicroVax-II, on which machine a single drawing takes about an hour of CPU-time" (Cohen 855). Cohen's program performance was designed as event-driven and randomised. The limitations which emerged in the process were so significant that they eventually made the procedure redundant. Importantly, the stop did not imply the completeness of representation. The Artist has clearly differentiated between completeness, correctness and plausibility of representation. His priority was to investigate the basic necessary conditions for producing a plausible image. Such conditions were established on a high-level description in a statement such as: draw three persons in a botanical garden. Having established clear stop criteria, an artist using the program would be free to allow it autonomy.

With machine-learning, stop criteria become much more problematic. Designers who work with generative adversarial networks struggle with theoretical lacunas, part of which pertain to training and evaluation of the system. Although each iteration of the program runs in limited time, there are no universal criteria for generative adversarial network training to be terminated. It has been acknowledged that the training should stop when the program reaches Nash equilibrium: an optimal balance between the loss function of discriminative and generative networks. However, instances when a program oscillates between two values weaken this rule. Moreover, there is no agreement as to whether the loss function should be the only criteria to decide on termination. Depending on the training set and future use of a programme, principles such as human spectator judgement are recommended. We could compare a never-ending training procedure to a non-halting algorithm. There is no general rule that could inform us about the consequences of interruption. Shaped by human labourers engaged to train the network, biased by the training set and trained according to vaguely defined criteria, AI generated artefacts might be far less autonomous than classic examples of generative graphics.

Generative art methods show that infinite loop execution or halting before a deadline are fundamental in terms of computation theory, albeit that in relation to art and design they are handled rather instrumentally. This discussion of the stop criteria closes the review of strategies that can be merged with technical systems. We have looked at how a passive component is used by artists engaging with a technical environment. We have explored how renunciation can be practiced – by performative resting, refusing and retreating from labour or consumption; how retreat executed by an artificial agent can impact on the

environment – overheating CPU, updating a database, opening access to a service. We have seen that retreat might become an essential and deliberately introduced part of the system's performance – by using data overload or arranging system-against-system setups. For the most part, we have been primarily concerned with socially-aware projects, with interventions rooted in a specific political or economic context. At first sight, the technical criteria for building a "renunciative machine" appears to be rather ambiguous. A programme's stop has turned out to be of secondary importance in the practice of generative graphics. The following interventions could have employed either some complex machine learning scripts or fairly simplified feedback loops. However, we have managed to touch on the issue of a mechanical system's capacity limitations as a strategy that is not only socially plausible but also grounded in the problems of system engineering.

Conclusions

The exploration proposed here has been limited to selected examples of artistic and social projects. It does not venture to fully analyse how definitions of artificial creativity could be reframed in terms of renunciation and withdrawal. Neither has it elaborated on economic and ecological aspects of post-growth creativity as opposed to the neoliberal concept thereof. Technological strands of the alternative program for artificial creativity have only been mentioned briefly. It has been my aim to encourage discussions on economical context, feasibility and minimal definitions, as these would create an opportunity to test and evaluate the proposed approach. In its current form this study provides a set of arguments for those who discuss alternatives to AI related practices or artificial creativity projects. Conceptual experiments envisioning scenarios of how our existence can be influenced and conditioned by the technological domain might become open to new interpretation once the patterns of refusal are applied more widely to human and artificial agents.

The diversity of concepts and artistic practices outlined above shows that reflection on passive aspects of creativity may contribute to both artificial creativity research and machine art studies. In the latter case the contribution would ensure further discourses on blending machine art with techno-materialistic approaches. The techno-materialist turn results from the observation that artists, developing not only reflex and automated, but also reflexive and anarchic forms of renouncement, rely on core engineering concepts such as system performance limitation, adversity, compression and parsing. Artistic interventions that put machines to idiosyncratic tests expose affordances that have already been embedded in the system. Experiments permitting manipulation of the performance intensity and scaling emerge as a new standpoint in the discussion on what form of creativity could be achieved. A simple exposure of the system's limitations, when attuned to a specific social context, may make a technical environment if not genuinely creative, then at least epistemologically intriguing.

A possible contribution to studies on artificial creativity would result primarily from renunciation providing an opportunity to theorise artificial creativity beyond predominant models derived from cognitive psychology. The

framework for artificial intelligence (AI) and creativity research, outlined by Margaret Boden, states that although any purely psychological theory can explain the phenomenon and the H (historical) creativity is considered more glamorous, the P (psychological) creativity is "more fundamental" (*Boden 268*). Observation of renouncement situates cognitive experience of the one who creates a vacuum in a busy environment on a second plane compared to the observations on behaviour of the one who adapts to the reconfigured, novel conditions. From that perspective the study of artificial creativity shifts from cognitive to behavioural and eventually phenomenological planes. At the same time, it remains linked to its original question and aims such as: to know whether AI models can illuminate human creativity, and how creative ideas arise.

Exploring the passive side of creativity also creates the potential to change artistic practice. It is possible that, instead of relating artificial creativity to questions on *how* algorithms generate novel solutions and surprising effects, it presents a creativity study with the question of *when* creative process occurs and *when* it terminates. The problem can be considered either from an artistic or algorithmic perspective. On the extremum of computer science, the termination is considered as the halting problem, which is a specific, undefinable aspect of the problem of algorithm termination (Harel 200, 202). What is termination of the program in the technical agenda becomes part of the creative strategy on a social level–specifically when art generated in an endless series comes with the cost of depriving it. Neglect of the art of the last line drawing posits generative methods as an art inflation factor. Some forms of functional retreat, I believe, should eventually make their way into an attention-arresting technical environment. It is largely improbable that a renunciation machine *sensu proprio* would ever function outside some artistic or philosophical niche. However, if someone should ever succeed in building one, the halting problem would explode into a myriad of patterns.

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