

The anti-user: between author and user

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Abstract: The dependency that artistic productions have on one form or another of technology can be argued, especially in recent times, under the hypothesis that, because visual arts no longer necessitate the use of exclusively dedicated technologies, the author of artistic productions can present themselves as an anti-user. By borrowing different technologies, but not necessarily adhering to their original functions, the author can, through their manipulation, unveil the mechanics of the technologies used for their own new aesthetic and conceptual purposes, creating what we commonly known today as new media.

Keywords: artefication, interface, technology, mediator, user, new media.

Introduction

To begin with, we could say that artistic production is a process dependent on some form of technology. Whether we are talking about the improvised bone tubes used to spray paint in the Cueva de las Manos, or the latest generation of compressed air paint guns, in artistic production we would find two things necessary: technology, that is, knowledge of the processes and methods of possible processing (“technology”¹), and the instruments within it (the apparatus necessary to execute the aforementioned processes). Of course, it is important to note that there are artistic practices that do not have an object-type finality², although they can (but not necessarily) acquire a certain materiality through the objects of their documentation. Even if we abstract from the materiality of documentation and look at an artistic practice that is as material as possible, which would use, for example, spoken language, we can argue, as it has been argued before, that even language is a technology³, an organic technology that uses the tools of one's own anatomy (vocal cords, throat, mouth and nasal cavities).

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¹ Ion Coteanu and Lucreția Mareș (2009). *Dicționarul explicativ al limbii române* [The Romanian language dictionary], Editura Univers Enciclopedic, București.

² In this case, we are talking not so much about *processes of artistic production* as about the *production of artistic processes*.

³ Because it would involve the knowledge of the processes and methods of processing sound.

However, returning to artistic practices whose objective purpose is not secondary, but constitutes the author's intention, we can introduce the relatively recent issue of the so-called commodification, or de-professionalization, of artistic production processes. If in traditional practices the production of the art object was conditioned by accessible mechanical-manual technologies known to their few initiated owners, starting with the industrial revolution, the accessibility of the techniques and materials necessary for artistic production acquired a quasi-democratic dimension. For example, the metal paint tube, which replaced the cave methods of storing oil-based paints, facilitated the production, transportation and large-scale marketing of prefabricated paints. This democratization of the materials and knowledge necessary for their processing can be said to have subsequently led to a commodification of art, or, more precisely, of production processes with artistic ambitions.

A concrete example that can present both this de-professionalization and a criticism of it could be the “Do It Yourself” series signed by Andy Warhol⁴. Basically, in this series, Warhol reconstructed on canvas, on a larger scale, a series of pictorial images taken from commercial paint-by-number kits. The final form of the works in the series does not represent the terminus of the recreational exercise invited by the original kits, as the respective processes are symbolically arrested and thus have the potential to betray the amateurism, mechanical character and accessibility of this new type of pictorial process. At the same time, it would be difficult to say that Warhol used a technology in a different way; it would be more appropriate to consider that Warhol reproduced the image of the respective technology, in his own terms.

This would be the point where we could introduce the two opposing identities announced in the title, namely, the identity of the user and that of the author, or artist. In order not to dissipate the arguments of this article in a direction that would target marketing strategies, let's look at the proposed terms as a whole. The term “user” has become indispensable in the information and communication technology industry, but it is also used in material industries, such as product design⁵. At the same time, there is a whole science to building

⁴ When we talk about the adoption of new technologies in artistic production processes, Warhol can be considered a technologist in the true sense of the word.

⁵ “In product design, the term *user*, and other abbreviations and extensions of it, have been fundamental in defining the relationship between people and tech. The former uses. The latter is used.” Adam Lefton (2024). *As a Designer, I Refuse to Call People Users*, “Medium”, 15 January (accessed January 2024), retrieved from: <https://medium.com/s/user-friendly/why-im-done-saying-user-user-experience-and-ux-in-2019-4fd6c6b7de23>. At the same time, it is curious that due to the large number of industries that have moved partially or entirely into the digital space, the term *user* almost overlaps with a previously fetishized term, namely *consumer* (moving from a consumerist to a user-ist society). A possible explanation for this change could be that the use of certain products or services (usually digital) does not necessarily imply their complete consumption, as they have a potential, for lack of a better word, immeasurable.

the most optimal user experience⁶. In fact, one of the many definitions of the previous term states: “All aspects of how people use an interactive product: how it feels in their hands, how well they understand how it works, how they feel while using it, how well it serves its purposes, and how well it integrates into the overall context in which they use it.”⁷

The latter term may have its origins in “... the ancient science of ergonomics (*ἔργον*, meaning work, and *νόμος*, meaning natural laws) - which attempted to establish a set of principles that made work more efficient and convenient...”⁸ Today, we are talking about products that make their use more efficient and intuitive, not necessarily for work purposes, often having a recreational purpose. Returning to Warhol's series, if we look at the function of the well-known paint-by-number kits, it becomes quite obvious that their (commercial) purpose was to facilitate any user's experience of (assisted) pictorial processes by offering an organized, logical and intuitive system. Each number had a corresponding colour, and the space in which it had to be applied was already predetermined by the delimiting outline. This can be compared to what is called today an “interface” when we talk about operating systems. In the case of both pictorial processes and personal computers, before contemporary interfaces, a more than minimal knowledge of the *modus operandi* was required, the necessary operative language not being accessible only by the force of intuition⁹. Whether we are talking about knowledge of the chromatic circle (and the plastic theories derived from it) along with the ability to apply that knowledge in a pictorial process, or whether we are talking about knowledge of programming language and the ability to use it to delegate certain specific commands to a computer, the relatively recent appearance of interfaces has paradoxically eliminated the operating mediators between the user and the technology by building a new distance, occupied by a new intuitive mediator. Strictly speaking, in the case of computers, we are talking about interactive graphic systems, also called graphical user interfaces, and Johanna Drucker argues that these are a border space in which we interact with a series of computational abstractions, manipulating what is hidden (processors, chips,

⁶ The term *user experience* is often abbreviated as *U-X*.

⁷ Lauralee Alben (1996). *Quality of Experience: defining the criteria of effective interaction design*, “Interactions”, Vol. 3, Issue 3, John Rheinfrank (Ed.), p. 12.

⁸ Marcin Treder (2014). *The History of User Experience Design*, “Medium”, 11 February. (accessed 30 January 2024), retrieved from: <https://medium.com/@marcintreder/the-history-of-user-experience-design-5d87d1f81f5a>.

⁹ “In the 1960s and 1970s, only the command line interface was available. It was not easy to operate and required specialized knowledge, such as the ability to understand the intricacies of an operating system and interact with it through instructions encoded in lines of text on the screen...” Johanna Drucker (2013). *Reading Interface*, “Publications of the Modern Language Association” (PMLA), pp. 128-214.

circuits, etc.) through metaphorical graphic representations that provide visual clues to their functionality¹⁰.

A user would thus have the identity of a delegator, but a delegator who can only delegate the (automated and pre-programmed) processes that are made available to him. The interface rules allow a limited number of commands¹¹, usually also to avoid accidental damage to the technological device used by the user who operates only through the interface. This can be compared, again, to paint-by-number kits. Having at their disposal the clear pre-established delimitations of the spaces in which certain prefabricated colours will be applied by their numerical counterpart, going beyond the contour or mixing the colours would result in an image different from the reference one.

Next, the difference between user and author could be viewed through the lens of the series “Wall Drawings (exclusive)” signed by Sol LeWitt. By delegating a series of graphic productions with the help of textual instructions, LeWitt confirmed his role as author (in the same way that an architect or a composer would), the identity of user returning to the one who, based on the understanding of the technology of language, and the knowledge of the minimal graphic processes required, would transpose, within the pre-established parameters, the textual instructions into a graphic visual space, materializing them. However, given that textual instructions do not have an operative function (independent of other agents), we can turn to a more recent project, which would confirm Sol LeWitt’s authorship (as it was viewed by the author¹²), through the very artistic process of delegating, in a more automated, operative and objective way, LeWitt’s instructions. This is the project descriptively titled Sol LeWitt “Translator #118” (Mitchell F. Chan, Studio F Minus, 2013), a project in which Chan translated LeWitt’s textual instructions into what we might call commands¹³ dedicated to a technological agent. Strictly speaking, by using a

¹⁰ Johanna Drucker (2013). *Reading Interface, op. cit.*, pp. 128- 216.

Basically, “With such a display [interactive graphics system], one could delete a file not by typing the delete command, but by pointing [a metaphorical digital arrow] at a graphical representation of a recycle bin.” Denning, Peter J., and Brown, Robert L. (1984). *Operating Systems*, “Scientific American”, Vol. 251, Issue 3, p. 96.

¹¹ Paul Krzyzanowki (2022). “Current operating systems support two modes of operation: user and kernel. Kernel mode has full privileges, while user mode has restricted privileges”, *Access Control: Thinking about Security*, “Computer Security”, 31 January (accessed 30 January 2024), retrieved from: <https://people.cs.rutgers.edu/~pxk/419/notes/access.html>.

¹² Sol LeWitt (1967). *Paragraphs on conceptual art*, “Artforum”, “When working in a conceptual spirit, it must be assumed that all planning and decisions are established before their execution, this latter exercise being an indifferent activity, the generating idea becoming a machine that produces art.”, p. 80.

¹³ Of course, even the presence of this term, and not the term instruction, in the programming language, may betray the obligation to perform specific actions by the technological agent, given the fact that “A command (.CMD) is a specific action assigned to a program in order to perform a specific requirement.” Rouse (2023). paragr. 1.

programming language, LeWitt's (somewhat optional)¹⁴ original instructions were delegated (by a new author) to a technological agent, an agent that, based on the commands entered, created a wide range of possible graphic variants. Of course, including these commands are possible thanks to an interface, being a command line interface, but this type of interface is not dedicated to the common user, but to the authors of programs that, as a rule, aim at the functionality of interfaces dedicated to the common user.



Fig. 1 Pierre Vivant, "Traffic Light Tree", 1998 (web source: wikipedia commons)

However, unlike agents professionalized in programming languages, the author of artistic productions would consider using those languages (or any other operating language of other technologies) not for the commercial purpose of creating an intuitive and competitive product (to compare with the user experience mentioned above), but for a purpose of his own, with an intentionality motivated aesthetically and conceptually. Of course, we cannot deny that the author of artistic productions can also build, in turn, a kind of interface, not necessarily interactive in the sense that we would use in the case of digital technologies, but in a sense closer to cinematographic practice, re-contextualizing and re-using the original, or commonly known, functions and meanings of the technologies. Thus, there are cases in which an author exposes the very nature of the technological environment used, revealing the known limits of the technology, as Laura Marks describes the processes of exposing the qualities of the digital image environment by video artists, who by exposing pixelated, blurred or strongly textured images betray the environment used,

¹⁴ "The idea itself, even if not visually materialized, is a work of art just like any other finished product." Sol LeWitt (1967). *Paragraphs on conceptual art*, "Artforum", p. 82.

while also highlighting its material quality¹⁵. We could compare this to the case of post-impressionist painting, precisely because the brushstrokes of the pen were not hidden, becoming a form of visible recording of them, which created the necessary conditions for reconstructing the pictorial processes, and at the same time, highlighted the technology and tools used. Thus, a new interface is built, through which the author of the artistic production exposes to the user public the anatomy of the (representational) technology that he uses.

Next, we could propose an artistic project that exploits both a form of urban technology and its related instruments, and the chosen site, more precisely the location space. The technology in question would be the Road Code, and the instruments of this technology would be road signs. Pierre Vivant implemented, in the project “Traffic Light Tree” (1998), both the technology and the previously mentioned instruments by reproducing several traffic lights and placing them on the central island of a roundabout. From a formal point of view, Vivant therefore enters the role of an author, both the author of artistic production and the author of the aforementioned technological instruments¹⁶. However, through the structure of the installation, the (re)assembly of traffic lights, in the chosen form, cancels their function from within, each traffic light corrupting the one adjacent to it. To a certain extent, we could say that Vivant cancelled the very function of that technology, making it symbolically impossible to use the roundabout if the indications of the installed traffic lights were respected.



Fig. 2 One of Wolfgang Staehle’s photos which documented the attacks on 11 September 2001
(web source: hyperallergic.com)

¹⁵ Laura U. Marks (2000). *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment and the Senses*, Duke University Press, London, p. XI.

¹⁶ Of course, according to the author, he also borrowed from the adjacent organic space, claiming that “(...) his sculpture imitates the adjacent landscape of the London Plane trees, while at the same time reflecting the continuous rhythm of the surrounding commercial, financial and domestic activities through the play of light.” Ellie McKinnell (2021). *This is The Reason There’s a “Traffic Light Tree” in The Centre of London*, “My London”, March (accessed 30 January 2024), retrieved from: <https://www.mylondon.news/news/zone-1-news/reason-theres-traffic-light-tree-18836541>

Before we can draw a conclusion, let us look at two more artistic projects that have the potential to help our hypotheses. In the first of them, we can observe how an existing technology was (re-)used, with a clear and apparently intrinsic function. This is Wolfgang Staehle, an author who used a technology almost dedicated to the television and news industries, namely the technology of live broadcasts. It is important to note that Staehle did not use the technology in its original way, but wanted the opposite of the intended function, not focusing on a specific event, but seeking the exposure of a visual correspondence of several spaces, in real time, in a single (exhibition) space, through the act of “(...) transmitting an experience of stillness, despite the fact that it is more or less live, and brilliantly questions the difference between live images and the static image, along with broader issues related to time and representation”¹⁷.

The last project we will attach can be about both the re-use of an existing technology and about systems that at first glance we would not consider technologies. If technology is “the set of processes, methods and operations used to obtain a certain product”¹⁸ (“technology”), we could include, based on this definition, also institutions or organizations, whose related instruments are human agents who put into practice or activate the respective knowledge. Let us take the example of the British Board of Film Censors, a non-governmental organization that has been responsible, since 1912, for the national classification and censorship of films exhibited in cinemas and of video works (television programs, campaigns, public information, etc.) released in the United Kingdom¹⁹. Given the obligation to submit any production (in physical format) for classification to the said board in order to distribute it in cinemas in the UK by its author, an independent film producer, Charlie Shackleton, managed to use the agents of the British Board of Film Censors for his own, metaphorical and subversive purposes, launching a fundraising campaign on a dedicated online platform in order to cover the costs necessary for the (potential) mandatory classification and censorship by the said board, raising approximately six thousand pounds, the equivalent of twelve hours of filming (considering that analysing one minute of filming cost around one hundred pounds). Described by the author as a documentary/horror, the actual production consisted of filming a still frame, at 4K resolution (approximately eight million pixels) for ten hours

¹⁷ Charlie Gere (2009). *Digital Culture*, 2nd edition, Reaktion Books Ltd, London, p. 28.

Of course, by a tragic coincidence, his project also acquired the original function of the technology used, becoming the first photographic documentation of the 9/11 attack.

¹⁸ Ion Coteanu and Lucreția Mareș (2009). *Dicționarul explicativ al limbii române* [The Romanian language dictionary], Editura Univers Enciclopedic, București.

¹⁹ Adam Boulton (2015). *Film-maker plots to force the British Board of Film Classification to watch 14 hours of paint drying*, “The Telegraph”, 20 November (accessed 30 January 2024), retrieved from: <https://web.archive.org/web/20221123045410/https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/newstopping/howaboutthat/12007626/Film-maker-plots-to-force-the-British-Board-of-Film-Classification-to-watch-14-hours-of-paint-drying.html>.

(resulting in a thirty-gigabyte file size) of the drying process of freshly applied white paint (by the author) on a wall. The board's delegated agents divided the viewing of the material over two days, and subsequently gave it a U (universal) rating, indicating that no sequence could offend or harm the audience of the material²⁰.

We could say that Shackleton did not use the services of that board, especially since his purpose was not to send a material for classification in order to later distribute it in cinemas, the intended audience of the material was dedicated, for Shackleton, we could say – his production was dedicated to the agents who classify and censor (where applicable) audio-visual productions.

Before drawing any conclusions, let us consider the following ideas. The way in which an author, an artist, would use technologies that are not (conventionally speaking) dedicated to his practice could be compared to what, originally in chess, was known as “computer moves”²¹. Subsequently being applied in several fields in which artificial intelligence operates, a computer movement involves a counterintuitive choice in order to obtain a result, a bizarre choice, apparently illogical and impossible to anticipate for a human agent²². However, it would be a choice that works efficiently within the specific parameters required. The inability of the human agent to understand certain operations of artificial intelligence algorithms later led to the development of a type of explainable artificial intelligence²³, which “...enhances the transparency, trust, fairness and accountability of artificial intelligence systems”²⁴. Returning to computer movements, that is, the use of technology in ways that a user would not think of using it, we could observe a symmetry between artificial intelligence, its unpredictability for the common user, and the author of artistic productions, who also uses technology in unintended ways.

²⁰ Adam Boulton (2015). *Film-maker plots to force the British Board of Film Classification to watch 14 hours of paint drying*, “The Telegraph”, 20 November (accessed 30 January 2024), retrieved from: <https://web.archive.org/web/20221123045410/https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/newstoppers/how-about-that/12007626/Film-maker-plots-to-force-the-British-Board-of-Film-Classification-to-watch-14-hours-of-paint-drying.html>.

²¹ *Computer Moves* is the original term.

²² “The computer algorithm operated by performing an indiscriminate deep search through the tree of possibilities, a less elegant procedure known as brute-force search. Advances in chip architecture and parallel processing made this process fast enough to beat Kasparov, but, as Noam Chomsky has said, this was about as interesting as the fact that a bulldozer can lift more than a weightlifter.” Andrew Blevins (2017). *Computer Moves: How Intelligent Machines Can Teach Us The Necessary Skill of Losing*, “Reallifemag”, 3 April (accessed 30 January 2024), retrieved from: <https://reallifemag.com/computer-moves/>.

²³ *Explainable A.I.* is the original term.

²⁴ Ajitesh Kumar (2022). *What is Explainable AI? Concepts & Examples*, “Data Analytics”, March (accessed 30 January 2024), retrieved from: <https://vitalflux.com/what-is-explainable-ai-concepts-examples/>.

Looking at the condition of the artist, as an author, or even of research through art, we could consider that the assumption of technologies that are not originally dedicated to artistic practice places the author of artistic productions in the role of a technologist rather than a scientific researcher²⁵. In fact, in recent artistic practices, we could observe a constant borrowing, both of technologies and of theories that do not originally address an artistic dimension, whether we are talking about replacing the pen with the brush (as in the case of Pierre Soulages)²⁶ or replacing the sculptural representation with the subject of the representation (*The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living*, D. Hirst, 1991). Thus, the author of artistic productions would present himself as an anti-user, not using possible technologies only as an end for a means, but seeking aesthetic and conceptual solutions to calibrate technology or theories that are not dedicated to art, for their own purpose, through methods of materializing or translating information and processes into their own allegorical spaces, or, in fewer words, building new (artistic) environments by appropriating almost any already existing technologies and theories that belong to other fields.

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²⁵ Mario Bunge notes that "...The success of the scientist lies in his ability to separate himself from his object of study, particularly when the object happens to be a psychological subject, through his capacity for detachment, the ability of the technologist lies in placing himself inside the targeted system, at its head." Bunge, Mario (1996). *Technology as Applied Science*, "Technology and Culture" (The John Hopkins University Press și Society for the History of Technology) 7 (3).

²⁶ From our own history, we could mention the two categories of the 19th century – the *heavy painters* and the *light painters*, the latter being painters of art – Stănescu, Radu D. (2014). "Când pictorii erau numiți «zugravi de subțire»." ["When artistic painters were called, 'light painters'"], "Ziarul Financiar", 28 February (accessed 30 January 2024), retrieved from: <https://www.zf.ro/ziarul-de-duminica/cand-pictorii-erau-numiti-zugravi-de-subtire-de-dan-radu-stanescu-galerie-foto-12154242>.

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