Artistic Interventions in the ICT Industries: Legitimate Critical Practice or Empty Gestures in the Contemporary Digital Age?

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ARTISTIC INTERVENTIONS IN THE ICT INDUSTRIES

LEGITIMATE CRITICAL PRACTICE OR EMPTY GESTURES IN THE CONTEMPORARY DIGITAL AGE?

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1 INTRODUCTION

Much of the digital transformation is driven by commercial and organizational interests and is subject to the influence of major information and communication technologies (ICT) companies, software and platform providers, and technical research institutions. Within these contexts, there has been a marked increase in the incorporation of artistic and creative practices into the development of digital technologies and applications. From artist in residency programs in private technology companies to creative collaborations in academic research labs, the development and design of ICT technologies are increasingly subject to the input of artistic and creative practitioners.

More broadly, the recent uptick of arts-in-technology programs has been driven by the increasing urgency of issues such as algorithmic bias, data privacy, disinformation as well as larger movements towards addressing the wider ethical, socio-political and environmental implications of the digital transformation. At the same time, among enterprise and technology development leaders there seems to be a growing recognition that artists and creative strategies are beneficial in terms of critiquing underlying presumptions about the relative value of outputs and diversifying future project developments. Accordingly, perspectives on these artistic engagements in industry run the gamut from deeming them compromised and complicit (Wilk, 2016) to creating direct, meaningful engagement and critical participation with those that drive technological development in the digital transformation (Fraaije et al., 2022). There are a variety of strategic goals for industry to initiate these engagements, ranging from widening the perspectives of engineers to implicitly addressing social, economic, or political issues to using artists to leverage "innovation" and improved public relations (McDermott and Fieseler, 2021).

But the collaborative relationships between the ICT industry and artists necessitate further questions of interpretation and evaluation of the practices, values, and outcomes created. For example, how do artists engaged with ICT companies critique the industry while maintaining relationships for funding? Does the work of artists legitimize corporate decisions? In what different ways are value attached to artistic practice in these entrepreneurial/corporate contexts and how does these differ for the different parties involved? Does the undervaluation of artistic work persist in industry through "opportunities" like residencies? Can the participation of artists in ICT industrial research and development domains ever truly challenge the multifaceted problems of contemporary technologies and contribute to alternative technological futures?

2 ARTISTIC PRACTICE AND ICT RESEARCH

Drawing on the case of *the Department of Ultimology (DoU)*, an ongoing artistic project that has been situated in an ICT research and development setting, this enquiry explores how the arts can have a valuable impact at the foundational level of the digital transformation through its diffusion with the ICT industry and research. The *DoU* project was initiated in the context of an artistic residency at the CONNECT Centre for Future Networks in Trinity College Dublin. The project uses artistic methods to promote the hypothetical concept of *ultimology*, which refers to the study of endings. By paying close attention in the present to entities that are vulnerable or at risk to ending in different contexts, the DoU sets out to explore themes and questions around endings and imaginary possibilities.

One example of their artistic approach was the workshop as part of the Weizenbaum Conference 2022, whereby the *DoU* invited participants to work with and learn from turf—a highly contested material composed of deposited wetland vegetation, which, when extracted from bog environments in Ireland, dried, and compressed, can act as a fuel source. Turf is an entity at the intersection of contemporary conversations around environmental concerns, climate justice, value, tradition, natural capital, and energy usage in an Irish context, where technology and data centers are making rapidly increasing demands on the national grid. In the context of this workshop, turf is offered as an ultimological material; its sale and distribution is increasingly likely to be made illegal in the near future. During the workshop, participants were invited to encounter turf—to handle and transform it, while discussing its value as a contested and vulnerable material. Through tactile handling and transformation of this material, the workshop participants generated a discussion on the disputed and nuanced issues of value and endings.

3 CONCLUSION

Art can be used to express and represent imaginaries, ideas and phenomena previously unseen, leading to open discussion of things we may not have dared to think or express, and serve towards the concrete formulation of questions that can help move society forward. The work of the artists in this workshop permits imaginative experimentation that has the potential to forge new, unexpected, and alternative ways of thinking that disturb taken-for-granted and unreflective knowledge by initiating novel and unforeseen connections. In turn, by disturbing unreflective knowledge, imaginative experimentation, such as the experiments put forth by the *DoU,* give rise to deeper ethical considerations and fresh perspectives on technologies and innovation. Being unrestraint by the logics of established methodological procedures in engineering and science, the work of the *DoU*

demonstrates how art's open experimental methods permit a freer and less constrained form of inquiry that validates provocation, nonconventional methods, and speculation.

In conclusion, this research explores how the participation of artists in research and industry domains might challenge the multifaceted problems of contemporary technologies and contribute to alternative technological futures. While everyday understandings of sociotechnical relations often appear locked within a narrative paradigm that the current projected future is inevitable and unchangeable, artistic practice can operate as a means of opening up tacit knowledge and giving time and space to imagine and voice alternative ideas and theories that are otherwise unheard. Nevertheless, further questions remain in terms of preventing the instrumentalization of artistic practice in ICT industry and research contexts as well as the long-term commitments of ICT industry and research organizations to engage with artists over sustained periods of time.

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