

# Rising above our silos

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# RISING ABOVE OUR SILOS

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## RISING ABOVE OUR SILOS

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*The world only spins forward. We will be citizens.  
The time has come. [...] The Great Work Begins.<sup>1</sup>*

While Jeff Bezos and Elon Musk made headlines in 2018 by devising space retreats for the elite, the United Nations' Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), supported by many scientists, warned of a major, looming environmental catastrophe that would strike by 2030.<sup>2</sup> Meanwhile, governments remain preoccupied with spending billions of euros on protecting their geographic boundaries by building walls—both physical, like those in the USA, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Hungary, and ideological, such as those that have surfaced in the Brexit debate, and many other elections the world over. On the technological front, machines of surveillance and control are being developed and are proliferating exponentially, including iris, face, and voice recognition software, fingerprinting, DNA, accelerometers, IP and MAC address trackers, as well as microchip subdermal implants connected with external databases. Many of these technologies are used in combination with an already advanced GPS hardwired into most devices. Described by Apple CEO Tim Cook as being part of a 'data industrial complex',<sup>3</sup> the patent protected technologies feed databases containing mass data to which only tech giants and some governmental agencies are granted access. Similarly to how, historically, mass media spread the messages of pre-internet protest movements, it is those who control the algorithms who have the power to influence public opinion today.

*State Machines* is a collaborative, EU-funded project which started in 2017. Discussions between the partners, Aksioma (SI),<sup>4</sup> Drugo More (HR),<sup>5</sup> Furtherfield (UK),<sup>6</sup> Institute of Network Cultures (NL),<sup>7</sup> and NeMe (CY),<sup>8</sup> have centered around increasing precarity in the wake of a tumultuous political year and the need to conceive workable alternatives and inclusive futures. How can we learn to think beyond the limits of the neoliberal and extreme nationalist logics that shape the world around us? And, how do we respond to this new world order made up of algorithmic news feeds, high-frequency trading, geofences, and for-sale citizenship? We have distilled our questions into an overarching *leit-motif*: 'What tools do we need to understand this world, and how can contemporary forms of cultural production assist in envisioning and enacting other possible futures?'<sup>9</sup>

1 One of the main characters, Prior Walter, in Tony Kushner, *Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes*, New York: Theatre Communications Group, Inc., 2013, p. 290.

2 'Global Warming of 1.5°C', IPCC, <http://www.ipcc.ch/report/sr15/>.

3 European Data Protection Supervisor, 'Keynote address from Tim Cook, CEO, Apple Inc', *YouTube*, 24 October 2018, <https://youtu.be/kVhOLkIs20A>.

4 Aksioma – Institute for Contemporary Art, Ljubljana, <https://aksioma.org/>.

5 Drugo More, Rijeka, <http://drugo-more.hr/>.

6 Furtherfield, London, <https://www.furtherfield.org/>.

7 Institute of Network Cultures, Amsterdam, <http://networkcultures.org/>.

8 NeMe, Limassol, <http://www.neme.org/>.

9 Quote from the *State Machines* application document submitted for funding from Creative Europe.

Two years later, we're faced with the potential reality of having asked this question too late, and further ponder whether any of these 'possible futures' are indeed probable within the current bio-geo-political mainstream. Much of the information we collected during our research indicates that the interconnected environmental, political, economic, scientific, and technological events of recent years have not been uniformly embedded in public consciousness. Disturbingly, a unified perception of humanity is absent from most contemporary hegemonic rhetorics. With ethnically and racially charged violence on the rise, free speech is rapidly being eradicated and censorship is no longer about suppression 'but about controlling your attention and your credibility.'<sup>10</sup> The diversionary, disruptive tactics of the *dérive*<sup>11</sup> proposed by the Situationists to help us see, question, and understand our world, and embraced by tactical media artists just over fifteen years ago, have now devolved to hopelessly distract us from it. Just in case our world does not offer enough complexity as it is, we are augmenting it with manipulative digital diversions and (mis)information through a plethora of news sources—many of which are either biased or just plain fake, interspersed with adverts for products we do not need, lifestyles we can only dream of, and holiday packages we cannot afford.

By inviting artists and theorists to focus on how these technologies and their networks impact our lives, we look at what this means for our collective and individual identities, and our shifting notions of citizenship, digital labor, and finance. This publication re-examines the current techno-political mainstream and the unscrupulous array of technologies being developed, so as to maintain and redesign 'users' into politically exploitable gimps and digital cash cows, or as proprietary data sources on tap.

Until recently, blissfully unaware EU citizens might have fancied themselves as living in a borderless reality, but in actual fact many of the world's border walls have been erected in the past two decades. Besides the pompously propagandistic 'Trump border wall'—which will have, and *already* has in anticipation of it, devastating and very real consequences—many more miles of so called 'anti-illegal immigration' walls are currently under construction across the world.<sup>12</sup> But not all borders are physical, and not all borders are quite as fixed as a concrete wall. Less visible are the ideological, technological, and algorithmic walls and fences that immigrants ever more often face, which are just as effective in barring physical access or denying basic permissions (Krystian Woznicki). The other end of the freedom-of-movement spectrum is occupied by those that can afford citizenship-by-investment programs. And, all the while, seemingly endless hoops to jump through are created for those without the right documents. 'For-sale' passports simultaneously assist in the disappearance of all kinds of obstacles for those who are able to pay the right price (James Bridle). And, not only is digital technology used to construct

10 @scrippscollege, "You have to think of censorship not as managing speech but about controlling your attention and your credibility."-Zeynep Tufekci @zeynep', *Twitter*, 16 October 2018, 3:41 AM, <https://twitter.com/scrippscollege/status/1052011566474780673>.

11 Guy Debord, 'Theory of the Dérive', trans. Ken Knabb, *Situationists International Online*, <https://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/si/theory.html>.

12 'Border Barrier', *Wikipedia*, 1 February 2019, [https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Border\\_barrier&oldid=881237304](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Border_barrier&oldid=881237304).

walls or facilitate the financially aided undoing of them, but media technology is also becoming a ubiquitous staple of state control in countries around the world, such as state-run social media in Israel (Rebecca L. Stein).

The use of digital technology to reinforce state ideology is not restricted to militarized zones. Research on the effectiveness of CCTV cameras in the reduction of crime is far from conclusive<sup>13</sup> and, despite concerns over privacy, the technology is as popular as ever. In 2011, for example, it is estimated that there was one camera for every 32 citizens in the UK, operated by the state as well as the private sector.<sup>14</sup> Adding facial recognition and other tracking technology to the mix means that our being in the world is operationalized in ways that are increasingly hard to notice. Many artists, activists, and hackers are working on ways to undermine and distort these technologies or to counteract their effects without impeding human interactions; for example, through caps glowing with ultraviolet light or scarves designed to throw off facial-recognition artificial intelligence (AI) (Francis Hunger; Emily Van Der Nagel).

Activist strategies against some of the unwanted effects of state-implemented technologies are nothing new. Currencies, for example are so wide spread that they are hardly recognizable as technology, and any alternatives largely remain locked in the ideologies they purport to oppose. While blockchain-based cryptocurrencies are the disruption *du jour*, there is a long history of 'alt-coins' that create new uses and meanings as they travel from one hand to the next. What can we learn from the creativity and insubordination that was associated with 'hobo nickels' or 'convict love tokens' from centuries past (Max Haiven)? And, when looking at the blockchain, how can we move *beyond* coding the *n*th cryptocurrency into being or trying to find the one chain to rule them all (Rob Myers)? How can we put activist and artistic exploration and imagination to use in creating technologies that are truly disruptive of the status quo (Max Dovey)?

Meanwhile, art as a financial asset is expanding into new dimensions on the blockchain. No longer functioning as something to be experienced, analyzed, or viewed, artworks can now be effective in entirely new ways while they are tucked away in impenetrable, climate-controlled freeports. Made visible only as smart contracts in the brief, continual moments, they are exchanged across the world while never changing location (Rachel O'Dwyer). This spectral (dis)appearance is something that is associated with trading and money more broadly and doesn't do much to deconstruct the perceived blackbox of finance (Patricia De Vries). What's more, the language we use to describe the financial and technological systems that hold us in their grip is far from ideal (Paul Vanouse), and perhaps a radical, activist reclaiming of agency is needed. Perhaps the individual has to become a corporate actor in order to get some

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13 'The Effectiveness of Public Space CCTV: A review of recent published evidence regarding the impact of CCTV on crime', *Scottish Government*, December 2009, <https://www2.gov.scot/resource/doc/294462/0090979.pdf>; Sophie Blok, Lotte Kuipers, and Mark Middel, 'Cameratoezicht is altijd een succes. Of die camera's nu werken of niet', *Vrij Nederland*, 4 February 2019, <https://www.vn.nl/cameratoezicht-altijd-succes/>; Emmeline Taylor and Martin Gill, 'CCTV: Reflections on Its Use, Abuse and Effectiveness', in Martin Gill (ed), *The Handbook of Security*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.

14 Paul Lewis, 'You're Being Watched: There's One CCTV Camera for Every 32 People in UK', *The Guardian*, 2 March 2011, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2011/mar/02/cctv-cameras-watching-surveillance>.

sort of purchase on the algorithmic forces that are shaping society today (Marc Garrett). Perhaps we need to follow the flexibility and reassembling of identity through which Lynn Hershman Leeson (interviewed by Marc Garrett) allows her audience to explore and build a place of human fluidity in the midst of technologies of precision.

On a political level, we're seeing the dramatic consequences of austerity politics in many countries all over the world. Business is never far away, always ready to fill the gaping holes left by retreating governments. In particular, healthcare is a vulnerable sector when it comes to the smooth but often ethically debatable start-up solutions. When affordable professional care is not an option, it is now possible, for example, to treat your depression by talking to a bot via a smartphone app (Lidia Pereira). Acting against the need for these algorithmic care systems is artist Cassie Thornton (interviewed by Marc Garrett), who is setting up federated, bottom-up networks of health support in the context of the economic crisis in Greece. Beyond the immediate and destructive precarity of people living in crisis-ridden areas, the influence of capitalist logics is creeping into all aspects of life and personal relationships (Helen Kaplinsky).

Systems of knowledge distribution are influential for the kinds of activist behavior that they inspire and facilitate. There's a rich history of pirate libraries, devices, and networks that have carved out alternative forms of knowledge and created strong communities around mutual sharing and new world building.<sup>15</sup> Activist groups like *Black Lives Matter* have added virality and social network effects into the mix by distributing their syllabi on social media, allowing information to have effects beyond its usual walled gardens (Valeria Graziano, Marcell Mars, and Tomislav Medak).

The contents of this book shed light on a selection of the ideas and activities currently resisting the hegemonic, systemic violations of often talked about but seldom cited human rights (that is, the right of recognition (Article 6), right of privacy (Article 12), right to nationality (Article 15), etc.).<sup>16</sup> This book stresses that we can, if we want to, reclaim our right to forge a healthier, freer, and more egalitarian future. As we adapt to this undulating terrain, we need to forge new forms of agency by rising above the silos we are used to. Then, maybe, we will be emotionally and strategically equipped to face what the 21st century asks of us.

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