

Julieta Aranda, Ana Teixeira  
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**Turk, Toaster,  
Task Rabbit**

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This is a text about the utopia of a frictionless space defined by perfect reception and its discontents.

In the late eighteenth century a chess-playing automaton toured the courts of Europe. Known as the “Mechanical Turk,” the automaton defeated Napoleon and Benjamin Franklin before being exposed as a hoax: hiding in its innards, a human operator was, in fact, moving the chess pieces. In a way, this was a reverse Turing test, predating Turing: a kind of labor in which it is required that humans pass for machines – with all that this passing entails, mainly a forfeiting of needs and rights, and more importantly, a forfeiting of time. In 2005 Amazon resurrected the “Turk” but generalized its principle: the Amazon Mechanical Turk is a crowd-sourcing internet marketplace that “enables individuals and businesses to coordinate the use of human intelligence to perform tasks that computers are currently unable to do.”<sup>1</sup>

Technically speaking, every mechanism usurps a human function. Automation has a political unconscious: behind every attempt at automating the production process lies what Barbrook and Cameron called the “quest for the perfect slave,” who will never rebel or ask for a raise.<sup>2</sup> Since the first Industrial Revolution, several waves of techno-utopianism have sought to extract slave-like labor from automatic machinery. But whereas technology is usually expected to render work obsolete, to free laborers from the curse of labor, in reality it tends to render workers more pliable and prone to exploitation, and ends up extracting machine-like labor from automated humans.

Automation also breeds technically challenged pockets, cracks, and fissures, which need to be filled by humans. It is within these zones of friction between the social and the economic that one finds mechanical turks and task rabbits: labor that cannot unionize and to whom you do not even owe the courtesy of offering a hot cocoa for shoveling the snow out of your driveway.

In the wake of the USSR’s demise, *Wired* magazine ran a cover story titled “The Long Boom,” which claimed that, no longer encumbered by political strife and ideological antagonism, the world would witness unending market-driven prosperity and unabated growth.<sup>3</sup> The convergence of media, computing, and telecommunications would inevitably beget freedom and direct democracy. But the fall of the Berlin Wall didn’t mark the beginning of a global democratic era – rather, its opposite. As a United States senator once said, the European welfare state was an aberration, an effect of the Cold War; once Communism had been defeated, social democracy became redundant.



Vandals take over virtual Denmark in Minecraft and trash it with American pride.



German Chancellor Angela Merkel tests a robotic arm while visiting one of the leading producers of industrial robots in the KUKA factory in Augsburg, Germany. The *New York Times* recently referenced the company in its coverage of the increasing automation of assembly lines in China.

Though the internet was hailed as a solution to all kinds of perennial problems – blogs will solve the issue of the corporate consolidation of the press; Bitcoin will solve currency manipulation and rampant corruption in financial markets; social media will fix the democratic deficit – the digital economy entails a shift from a formal to an informal economy, which replaces formal benefits, like salaries, pensions, and social safety nets, with “likes” and barter, while the formal benefits accrue to the very few.<sup>4</sup> Under the twin pressures of financialization and what is called “the sharing economy,” capital has emancipated itself from its direct relationship to labor – which is not to say that it has done away with work; it has just overcome the need to pay formal salaries, along with the claim to formal possessions. As Anthony Marcellini has put it, “every new technological advance means that we get to do for free work that we used to be paid for, and that we get to lease the things that before we were able to own.”<sup>5</sup> The idea of citizenship, with all its rights and social obligations, has faded and given way to the citizen-as-user, and the main function of the state has simply become to guarantee that credit is converted back onto cash payments, no matter how much misery such conversion causes. In *Living in the End Times*, Slavoj Žižek contends that the (brief) marriage of capitalism and democracy is over, but what seems to be also over is the (rather longer) affair between capitalism and the middle classes. While countries have shifted from being the providers of services (health care, education, welfare) to being the procurers of – mostly financial – services, corporations behave more and more like countries. These new multinational corporate states are not bound by the constraints of physical geography, but this doesn’t mean that they are boundless territories. As the digital sphere becomes incorporated, a virtual geography starts to become apparent. In order to better grasp its constitution, we must accept that it does not intend to function as a 1:1 representation of real space,<sup>6</sup> or to become a virtual equivalent to reality, because it is not defined by contiguous space, nor is it defined by the standard markers of the nation-state (race, religion, language, colonization). Rather, it is structured around notions of profit, and it doesn’t limit itself to the physical sphere; it actually cuts into both personal space and time, extracting information and monitoring your geolocation in the process of defining itself and its own boundaries. Curtailing the potentiality of the medium, a not-quite-obsolete authority enters into operation. Instead of a seamless World Wide Web, we are faced with the creation of artificial borders: the corporate sandboxing of

the digital sphere.<sup>7</sup>

How do digital borders manifest? In the sandboxing of devices made by Apple, which prohibits the use of third-party apps and penalizes the jailbreaking of iPhones. Or in China’s internet policy, which determines the bounds of Google. These invisible borders were also apparent in January 2014 when cellphone users in Ukraine who happened to be near the scene of the Maidan clashes received text messages saying, “Dear subscriber, you are registered as a participant in a mass riot.” Willingly or not, these users were about to cross the border between the good and the bad Kiev.

Though social media was hailed as the enabler of the Arab Spring, the millions who took to the streets achieved no political gains, and, in the wake of Snowden’s revelations, an even darker picture of a corporate, surveillance-driven internet began to emerge. Displacing and complicating the image of the internet as a space of limitless possibility, the World Wide Web, like the Lacanian mother, was split in two.<sup>8</sup> Instead of a good internet, based on communication and community, we are now faced with the bad internet, a tool of corporate surveillance and political punishment. Everywhere, the global circulation of images and commodities goes hand in hand with increasing partitions in the social sphere: segregation, cultural difference, inequality.



President Obama is hugged by a koala bear before the start of the first G20 meeting on November 15, 2014 in Brisbane, Australia.

If we understand digital space as a territory in its own right, we need to scrutinize how said territory is being mapped. This is not happening with Borgesian fidelity,<sup>9</sup> as the corporate interests that are trying to describe this territory are not concerned with accuracy or diversity, nor are they interested in the imaginary (in old maps, unknown lands were often inhabited by fantastical beings, like sea serpents, monstrous

beasts, or mermaids, whereas the maps of the digital world are being drawn in Silicon Valley, with little regard for mapping unique or differentiating characteristics of space). Instead of imagining how one could inhabit the spaces being mapped, the digital topographers labor to create a homogeneous landscape where a user is a user, disregarding the social and cultural “accidents” in the landscape, and filling the unknowns in the map with replicas of themselves.

In her seminal essay “The Cyborg Manifesto,” Donna Haraway argues that the effect of a digital ontology is the effacement of all oppositions. Instead of firm dichotomies, the distinction between “human and animal,” between “organism and machine,” and between “physical and non-physical,” are increasingly leaky; everything becomes “nothing but signals, electromagnetic waves, a section of a spectrum.” The digital frontier carried the promise of a postpolitical condition, free of agonism and struggle; and of an economy of abundance instead of an economy of scarcity. But the California dream was a weak utopia: the frictionless space of perfect technological reception is a first-world effect. The conditions in which innovation is produced have nothing to do with the conditions into which it is deployed. Or, to put it in William Gibson’s words, “The future is already here. It’s just not evenly distributed.”<sup>10</sup> The many remain as a digital brute force, the garbage men of post-Fordism, a collective headless body performing menial tasks. Either on- or off-line, “slave labor cannot be obtained without somebody being enslaved,”

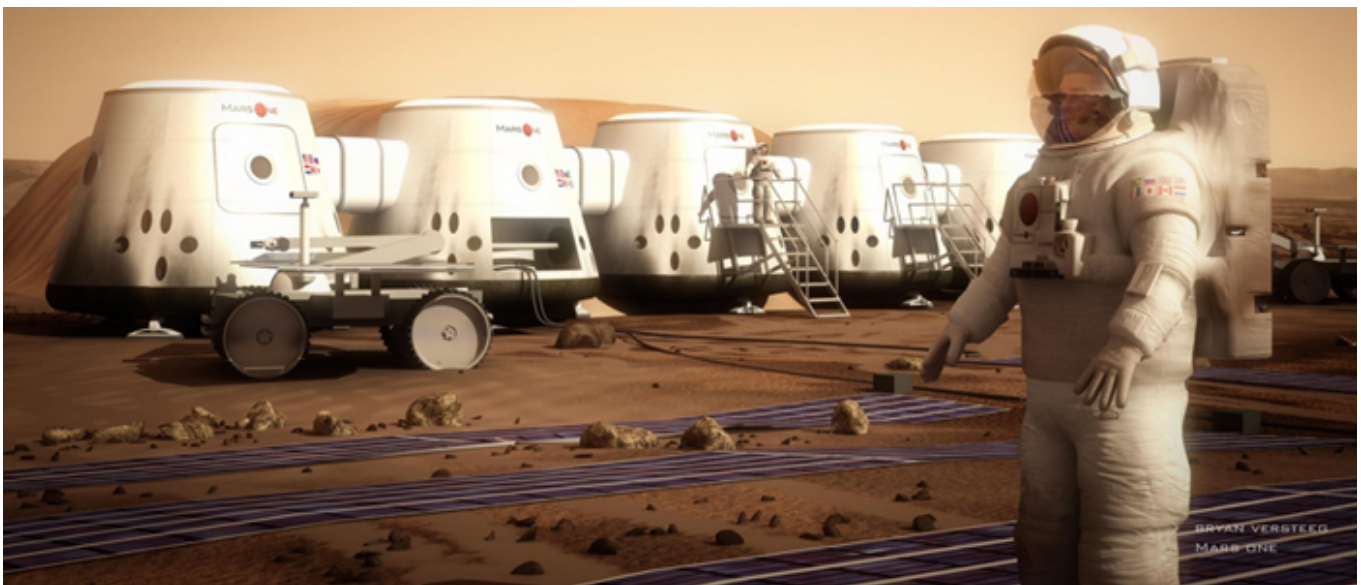
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and no technological fix will be able to solve our social problems because technology itself engenders them.<sup>11</sup> No technology is immaterial or self-sustaining, and its high level of energy consumption degrades both the social and the natural environment; it produces material, animal, and human waste.<sup>12</sup>

The production of digital/affective devices, which double as control mechanisms, is dependent on the decimation of every digitally underrepresented region of the world. As this new geography displaces the old, the digital subject becomes more visible than the physical subject. While the circulation of celebrities, luxury goods, liberal professionals, tourists, and financial flows occupies the whole field of visibility, refugees, seasonal workers, immigrants, and illegal aliens are rendered invisible.

What does the future look like for those lacking digital representation? And what does it look like for those who are overrepresented – the digitally obese? If the conditions under which I exist are too precarious for me to be considered a user in this new landscape, I may be destined for extinction, or I may already be extinct, part of a barren, obsolete present that will soon be discontinued.

But it may be that the constitution of this subject is not yet fully graspable, and that in the rush to create the conditions for its viability, we have neglected to generate the tools to understand the atomized psychological space that she inhabits. If subjectivity was a function of private property, what happens when all the frameworks of ownership are incorporated?<sup>13</sup>



Mars One aims to establish the first human colony on Mars by 2027.



A vast toxic lake surrounds Baotou, Mongolia, the result of mining and processing the region's rare earth minerals.

Even though the digital obeys physical laws that locate it within the material world, digital bodies are not fully recognized, and there is an ever-widening gap between how the treatment of a subject is prescribed, and how the subject is constructed. Take the example of the person who is institutionalized and has to surrender her digital devices so that she will be forced to interact only with her real friends, even though her relationships are at this moment dependent on her being able to reach them through the very same devices that are being taken away. This atomized space, which has opened up because of our reliance on technology, imbues devices with an affective quality, akin to that of transitional objects to a subject whose hetero-affective other is not necessarily human – the “selfie” is no longer analogous to a self-portrait, but functions rather as some kind of degraded mirror stage for this child of technology that sees the internet as her mother.

The logic of old-media temporality was color-coded: contemporary Africa was black and white, just like Dickensian England. To boot: the third world’s present belongs to the first world’s past. In the diffuse world of post-Fordist economies, all matter is in permanent motion, and all temporalities are spatialized. Online, every social form gets to have a second life; everything is an image; and all images are up for grabs. The Space Race has been revived as an extension of digital incorporation, but the fantasy of a cultural totality is full of cracks, and the increasingly pervasive vectors of global communication are by far more chaotic than one would care to suggest. Clerics in the UAE have chosen to distance themselves from this frontier narrative, issuing a fatwa that prohibits Muslims from joining any Mars expedition.<sup>14</sup> The US Department of Defense regularly posts drone-captured footage on its official YouTube channel; known as “drone porn,” these videos show recorded attacks and targeted killings. One could point to the reciprocal relationship they establish with the executions – typically beheadings – posted by fundamentalist insurgent groups: the more “drone porn” treats human casualties as metadata, the more gruesome Islamic State videos become. Rather than images of asymmetrical warfare, we could say that these are images at war (literally, with each other) over the image of the digital body. Although it is not possible to map the physical self onto the digital self, one could perhaps say that, in the guise of a Hegelian totality, an essence manifests itself in its alienation: every phenomenon is also defined by what it negates, falsifies, denies.

The internet doesn’t exist, but its effects are real – our electronic highways are littered with

roadkill. Marx’s greatest achievement – unparalleled to this day – was to render capital’s operations visible. At present, conspiracy theory is the poor person’s critique of ideology. Though optical technologies produce images of virtually everything, the greatest problem is opacity. As the visual became fully mediated, technology severed the link between image and representation.

Is it possible that, as Hito Steyerl suggests, the gap between the two forms of representation – political on the one hand, cultural on the other – is a constitutive feature of communication technologies and social media? Are the mechanisms that enable cultural participation simultaneously generating political exclusion?<sup>15</sup> Up until now a case has been made for the idea that the technical takes precedence over the social. But the internet is political before being technical. The consolidation of financial vectors runs parallel to the total disintegration of social bonds: the more integrated the algorithmic mapping, the more scattered social relations become. Across a dispersed marketplace, most of us are barred from all but a consumptive relation to “the global village.” The idea of a cultural totality (the internet as a single technological entity) displaces social erosion, but what appears as the medium’s phenomenology is in fact its ideology. The image of the internet is the degraded cipher for the total logic of capital.

Maybe the transition from analog to digital media can be seen as an aesthetic rather than an ontological problem. Representing nature as spectacle and the biosphere as totality,<sup>16</sup> the “postinternet condition” can perhaps be best described as a style<sup>17</sup>: what Emily Apter has called “oneworldedness”<sup>18</sup> (another name for Empire), or what Diedrich Diederichsen has described as a “vulgar Latourian fairy-tale,” or an “aesthetics of affectivity”<sup>19</sup> coupled with a mobilization of nature at the service of a human agenda – a common theme in Romanticism, which is about to be intensified by the introduction of the Internet of Things – conflated with Warholian currency (appropriation, debasement, iconophilia) and symbolist themes and tropes (liquidity, the over-humanization of nature, existential ennui, pastiche, esotericism, disaffection). What we call “third nature” can also be seen as reified history, while what masquerades as convention is actually allegory.

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"Hello World!" is often used to illustrate basic syntax of a programming language and to verify that a system is operating correctly. Here, a device prints the sentence onto brioche toast.

Once nature has disappeared, everything becomes a human sign, but whether the convergence of computing with bioengineering will bring about a “technological singularity” or result in a digital theme park is yet unclear. By 2020 there will be nearly twenty-six billion devices connected to the Internet of Things – twenty-six billion talking toasters, probably equipped with endearing interfaces – but the sublation of nature into culture will coincide with the consolidation of corporate ownership. The more technology merges with biology the more it becomes opaque *qua* technology; the more opaque this technology, the more transparent it renders its users. Our object-world will become ever more animated and lively, only that toaster will no longer be truly ours.

In spite of the political, economic, and ecological crisis of the last few years, the new social forms and categories that have emerged have failed to constitute themselves politically, and it’s hard to fathom what form change could take. In the absence of a collective horizon, the new (second) Industrial Revolution might not lead to the future but to the past, to a Victorian phantasmagoria of sorts, supplemented by consumer gadgetry and semiotic fetishism. A place akin to the Zone in Andrei Tarkovsky’s *Stalker*, a sentient environment able to materialize all your dreams – but with a twist.

x

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1  
See Wikipedia entry on Amazon Mechanical Turk [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Amazon\\_Mechanical\\_Turk](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Amazon_Mechanical_Turk)

2  
Richard Barbrook and Andy Cameron, "The Californian Ideology," *Mute*, vol. 1, no. 3 (Autumn 1995) <http://www.metamute.org/official/articles/californian-ideology>

3  
The header read: "We're facing twenty-five years of prosperity, freedom, and a better environment for the whole world. You got a problem with that?"

4  
Social theorist Jaron Lanier points to the case of Instagram, sold for a billion dollars but employing only thirteen people, as an example of how the internet is shrinking the economy – clearly, Instagram's "users" are the ones producing its value, yet their work is not formally rewarded.

5  
From an unpublished text.

6  
When physical states attempt to map themselves in this territory, the failure of this attempt at representation becomes apparent. In March 2014, the Danish Ministry of the Environment released a 1:1 topographical map of the entire country of Denmark in Minecraft, only to have it attacked by American hackers within two weeks. The hackers smuggled game "dynamite" into the map, planted American flags, and razed entire cities.

7  
It is no accident that this is the name for it, and a sandbox is where children play.

8  
Lacan argues that since babies cannot conceptualize ambivalence, they split the image of the mother into the "good" nurturing mother and the "bad" absent mother.

9  
"In that Empire, the Art of Cartography attained such Perfection that the map of a single Province occupied the entirety of a City, and the map of the Empire, the entirety of a Province. In time, those Unconscionable Maps no longer satisfied, and the Cartographers Guilds struck a Map of the Empire whose size was that of the Empire, and which coincided point for point with it. The following Generations, who were not so fond of the Study of Cartography as their Forebears had been, saw that that vast map was Useless, and not without some Pitilessness was it, that they delivered it up to the Inclemencies of Sun and Winters. In the Deserts of the West, still today, there are

Tattered Ruins of that Map, inhabited by Animals and Beggars; in all the Land there is no other Relic of the Disciplines of Geography." Jorge Luis Borges, March 1946 edition of *Los Anales de Buenos Aires*, vol. 1, no. 3.

10  
Quoted in *The Economist*, December 4, 2003.

11  
Barbrook and Cameron, "The Californian Ideology."

12  
In Baotou, Mongolia, the byproduct of rare earth mineral mining has created a vast toxic lake that spans several kilometers. Baotou's main exports are neodymium – used to produce lightweight magnets for in-ear headphones, cellphone microphones, and computer hard drives – and cerium oxide, mostly used to polish touchscreens on smartphones and tablets. One Kindle consumes the resources of four dozen books and has the carbon footprint of a hundred.

13  
General Motors and John Deere have argued that copyright law cannot conflate ownership of a vehicle with ownership of the underlying computer software. In response, lawmakers in Minnesota and New York have introduced "Fair Repair" legislation that asserts an owner's right to repair electronic equipment they've purchased.

14  
The UAE has deemed that there is no righteous reason for humans to travel to Mars; were Muslims to perish attempting the trip, their death would be considered akin to suicide. Reportedly, around five hundred Saudis and other Arabs applied online for the Mars One mission (the first prospective martian colony, the brainchild of a Dutch Company).

15  
See Tony Wood, "Reserve Armies of the Imagination," *New Left Review* 82 (July–August 2013) <https://newleftreview.org/II/82/tony-wood-reserve-armies-of-the-imagination>

16  
To paraphrase Kerstin Stakemeier, "Lunch Bytes: On Art and Digital Media" conference, Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin.

17  
As suggested recently by Philipp Ekardt at the "Lunch Bytes: On Art and Digital Media" conference, Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin.

18  
Emily Apter, "On Oneworldedness: Or Paranoia as a World System," *American Literary History*, vol. 18, no. 2 (Summer 2006): 365–389.

19  
"Lunch Bytes" conference.

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