

The Automated Condition (Princeton, 12–13 May 22)

Princeton University / University of Graz, May 12–13, 2022

Deadline: Nov 15, 2021

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The Automated Condition. Manifestations and Narratives in Art, Literature and Culture
Interdisciplinary Graduate Conference at the Department of German, Princeton University in cooperation with the Center for Cultural Studies, University of Graz.

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Keynote by Joanna Zylińska, King's College London.

Driverless cars, social credit systems, or Twitter poetry bots: our increasingly technologically optimized and algorithmically organized existence informs an automated condition, a mode de vivre centuries in the making, in which spontaneity, ingenuity, and exceptionality are re-defined through the standardization of processes of labor, production, and consumption. Concomitantly, the flip-side of the Fordian promise of total automation has become a bitter and unavoidable reality where automated systems upend the foundations of social interaction and artistic production alike. That this is the inevitable fate and triumph of the animal laborans would be the argument posited by Hannah Arendt, who warns in *The Human Condition*, like many others, how such advancements in automation, spearheaded by the industrial revolution and invention the steam engine, could result “in the deadliest, most sterile passivity history has ever known” (Arendt 1958). Moving within a variety of manifestations and narratives, this interdisciplinary graduate conference wishes to both connect and cross-pollinate historical case studies on automation with theoretical perspectives on the conditions it produces. Collectively, literature, art, and culture can provide vital points of entry into the interrogation of life in the automated condition, question whether it is truly a fatal form of passivity, and offer a nuanced and holistic understanding of its promises and its possibilities.

Even before the Renaissance, the discourse on “automatically” produced, “accidental”, “natural” or “self-emerging” imagery manifested. It most often refers to image-generating techniques that bridge nature and art, such as castings and nature prints (Felfe 2015/2019) or photographic processes (Geimer 2011, Wolf 2013). Especially the 19th century is ripe with responses to this hitherto unknown possibility of automation: Take E.T.A. Hoffmann’s *The Sandman* (1816) for example, the story of the uncanny robot Olympia, who imitates human music-making and dance with an exactitude commensurate with her cold and lifeless physique and her lack of emotion, wit, and personality. Various vanguard thinkers and producers explored the creative potential of such automated techniques early on (Talbot 1844-46, Ernst 1926), while others, especially in the first half of the 20th century, criticized the loss of human autonomy as unartistic (Baudelaire 1859, Benjamin

1935, Bazin 1945). What has been part and parcel of this historical development of automation is the continuous, and perhaps even inevitable, transfer of tasks, services, and other menial labor from subaltern human actors such as servants and scribes to electronic devices (Krajewski 2018) as well as the emergence of digital information and communication networks (Ludovico 2012).

These paradigmatic shifts and transformations inevitably led to ever-new forms of academic and artistic reflection on human and mechanical agency, as with the case of Vilém Flusser concerning the rise of technical images (Flusser 1983) which Jonathan Beller applied to the networked camera as a “vast automaton” that converts “all social (mediological) process into a feedback mechanism” (Beller 2017). More recently, artists have begun to reflect on the agency of apparatuses from theoretical vantage points. A wide range of responses emerge from the conceptual art of the 1960s and 70s up until post-internet practices informed by digital technology and networks (Kelsey 2012, Weiberg 2015). Today, AI-driven art (Zylinska 2020), algorithmic poetry (Zhou 2021), and computational music (Dean/McLean 2018) challenge anthropocentric understandings of ingenuity and originality. How are we to define a notion of technology that can anticipate as well as encapsulate the immense creative potential of computational artistry under the aegis of the automated condition?

Contributions can address, but are not limited to the following topics:

- historical, sociological, philosophical, psychological, or theoretical perspectives on automation
- automation in literature: forms, motifs, techniques
- automation in media and technology: manuscripts and scribes, printing and typography, circuitry and the electronic text
- automation in music: experimental music of the 1960s, live-electronics, indeterminacy, aleatory music, stochastic music, AI-driven music
- automation and the art history canon: surrealism, abstract expressionism, Dada, concept art of the 1960s/70s, AI-driven art
- automated art techniques: natural casting and impression, frottage, action painting, photographic processes, 3-D rendering/printing, GAN
- notions and manifestations of the aleatory, the unconscious, or chance in the context of automation
- demystification of the promise of automation through socio-political issues (gender, class, race, accessibility etc.), intersectional analyses of automation
- critical accounts of translation software, speech recognition, text-to-speech programs, and probabilistic inference as well as automatic alternative text, image recognition and tracking
- machine learning as a tool for imaginaries/creative writing/music, also in the form of artistic or experimental interventions such as lecture-performances, videos screenings, and others

This workshop, held in English, is a collaboration between graduate students of the Department of German, Princeton University and the FWF-project “Co-operative Art Techniques” at the Center for Cultural Studies, University of Graz. The first workshop will take place in Princeton on May 12-13, 2021. A second conference is envisioned to take place in Graz in the Winter Semester 2022/2023.

Despite the unpredictability of pandemic conditions, any and all attempts will be made to have an in-person conference in Princeton. Should conditions not allow to go forward due to international travel restrictions in place, a hybrid or online format will be pursued. The keynote and other com-

ponents of the conference will be live-streamed and made available online either way. A publication of the proceedings is planned.

To apply, please send an abstract of no more than 300 words with a provisional paper title, and a short bio in English to Dennis Schäfer (dennis.schaefer@princeton.edu) and Mona Schubert (mona.schubert@uni-graz.at) by November 15. Presenters will be notified by December 15.

Reference:

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