

Operativism. Social Intelligence and Mediation (Berlin, 5 Jun 25)

Institute for Cultural Inquiry, Christinenstr. 18/19, Haus 8, D-10119 Berlin, Jun 05,
2025

Marietta Kesting, Institute of Cultural Inquiry

The notion of 'operativism' had a notable career in the twentieth century, articulating the relation between Marxist theory and technological modernization, the working body and its optimization, machine vision and cinematic montage. This workshop proposes, on the one hand, to unearth a genealogy of operativism by engaging with archival research on Soviet film and media theory, and, on the other, to discuss its legacy in the context of materialist analyses of AI as an instrument of labour automation. Formulated in the late 1920s by Soviet Constructivist writer, playwright, and poet Sergei Tretyakov (1892–1937), during his time as a standing member of a commune on a collective farm (kolkhoz) in the northern Caucasus, operativism called for the deprofessionalization of the conventional writer and emphasized their organizational role within the farm's day-to-day operations: 'I call participation in the life of the material itself an operative relation' (Tretyakov). In this way, operational aesthetics participated in the extractivist dynamic of collectivization – in accordance with its ruthless economy of scale – which imposed a synchronized temporality on bodies and their production processes. At the same time, it proposed an experimental and participatory repurposing of authorship and mediation, influencing critical approaches ranging from Walter Benjamin's 'The Author as Producer' (1934) to Harun Farocki's observational films and his concept of 'operational images'. Operativism became a key notion for an interventionist and materialist transformation of the relation between singular and collective authorship and aesthetic and literary work as production, in relation to changing technologies and conditions of labour. The workshop seeks to analyse the various facets of operativism in the twentieth century by engaging with Soviet materialist visions and their lasting impacts. Building on this foundation, it also aims to interrogate automation, machine vision, and the shift from representation to action-oriented imaging, not merely as technological developments but as social phenomena. How can one think of AI not as the imitation of biological intelligence, but as the intelligence of labour and social relations? What is the role of social intelligence amid the extractive and exploitative logic of AI? How can artistic and social interventions question, subvert, and repurpose the ubiquitous idea of full machine autonomy?

14:30 Introduction by Marietta Kesting and Elena Vogman

15:00 – 17:00 Panel I

Materialism, Operativism, and Collectivization

1. Devin Fore
2. Michael Kunichika
3. Alla Vronskaya

17:00 – 17:30 Coffee Break

17:30 – 18:00 Screening

Eye/Machine by Harun Farocki

18:00 – 20:00 Panel II

Operativism, Mediation, and AI

1. Doreen Mende
2. Bettina Malcolmess
3. Matteo Pasquinelli

Registration is required, please find relevant information on the event's website:

<https://www.ici-berlin.org/events/operativism/>

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Reference:

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