Coded. A Somewhat Emotional State (Florence/online, 12–14 Nov 25)

Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florenz – Max-Planck-Institut (Florence/online), Nov 12–14, 2025
Deadline: Jul 1, 2025

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Everything is about technology, only technology is about emotions.
Coded-ness is a material quality, a trace of a process already past. Whether one looks at early modern Venetian Glassmakers' secret techniques that engrained technological as much as social codes into their cristallo, or at the traces of the human hand in a mass-produced cup from the 1950s in Ulm, or at the orientation of image production from landscape to portrait in contemporary social media art, coded for the purpose of this call is past tense and tangible in matter. It is also a process that is not only meant to embed technologies in things, but emotions, memories, and imaginaries. That means that treating code, coded or coded-ness as merely technologically defined falls short in an attempt to adequately analyze its emergence, its processes, or its effects.

In times where the developments of artificial intelligence are outmoded faster than they can be described, and where algorithms are interwoven with daily life at every turn, the question of whether "technology" is still the right term is a core concern of this symposium. Therefore, this call poses an ontological schism: modern technology critique, we argue, cannot address code in our present and future. Whether the cyborg-critique of Donna Haraway or technology critiques of modern thinkers since 1850, they all no longer hold when what "coded" means increasingly is inseparable from "crafted" for human senses and minds. One can, equally, no longer speak of the disenchantment—or re-enchantment—of the technological since their mutual entanglement is so total that there is no room for a Blochian critique of one toward the other.

Categories such as the concept of the utopian must shift consequently as well, since any utopia is increasingly not a technological but a social question. Art historical categories such as "semblance" and "likeness" gain new relevance when work created by humans, neural networks, or both is indistinguishable and one must ask whether just because something appears similar does not mean it is ontologically different; and, more importantly, what might be at stake in making such distinctions when goalposts are constantly and desperately being moved to preserve what is "human" within it.

How then can one meaningfully engage with questions of code in art or architecture history, with algorithmic customizations or large language models when one cannot distinguish their art, their output, and their coded-ness with human faculties? What if probed disciplinary methods are no longer sufficient for this technology (again, if it even can still be called one)? Is code finally a truly postmodern condition, or does any "post" regarding modernity bear no meaning in a coded world?

How do we expand social histories of coded things toward affective ones?

This call consequently looks elsewhere: it looks for insights from the history of emotions, for empathy as core quality of technology, for sensorial feedback or nostalgic projections, for expanded readings in disability studies or for alternative histories of architecture, art, technologies, or their objects. Whose needs for comfort and which desires does code (potentially no longer as technology) answer? Which does it create? What need for communication, what wish for permanence, what desire for transparency is motivating the coding efforts of each time or question? Embracing the awareness raised in the field of archaeology that the long-standing separation of matter (often "dirt") from "artefacts" has long led to irreversible destruction of information begs the question whether a potential de-coding of objects in the future might hold more promise than unearthing them in their present illegibility. Thus, we search for other temporalities in which to approach objects that might be ones of delay, postponement, promise, nostalgia or remembrance.

As follow up to the symposium on objects and their emergence by the Lise Meitner Group "Coded Objects" in October 2024, this iteration turns to the motivations that will coded-ness into material existence: How does one interpret the traces? And how does one escape the fallacy of temporal sequence, where objects seem to emerge from codes while they much rather need to be read across linear temporalities? We want to investigate how coded-ness might reside in literacy that is sensorial, emotional, psychological or otherwise reframed. We want to embrace reading, touching or tasting codes, utilizing an array of historical and disciplinary tools to test a new instrumentarium for the current condition of coded-ness that is no longer covered by what was formerly known as technology—all as highly precise, close readings. We hope to discover moments of euphoria and friction, of resistance and reinterpretation, and moving forward positively and critically—together, as humans.

Logistics and General Information
This symposium will be framed by invited speakers who probe the affective qualities of coded-ness, and invites papers that tackle the emotional, imaginative or otherwise affective reception and impact of coded objects. We aim to map out not (just) technological intent of coding something, but the conscious or collateral impact they have on senses and feelings. Modes such as memory, imagination, nostalgia, or humor can be as valuable for this investigation as more conventional analytic methods—with all the fascination and caveats that might entail. We welcome papers from diverse disciplines, geographies and historical periods.

The conference language will be English. Presentations are to be made in person, unless urgent circumstances prevent attendance. We will pay for travel and lodging for all those contributors who do not have institutional funding available. If you have any access needs or require childcare to enable you to participate, we try to accommodate these as much as possible.

Please send your abstract (max. 250 words) and a short CV (max. one page) to coded.objects@khi.fi.it by 1 July, 2025. We will send out notifications in late July.

We will all convene in Florence for the symposium from 12 – 14 November, 2025. If circumstances will not allow it, the conference will be held online.

About the Organizers

This Symposium is organized by the Lise Meitner Group "Coded Objects" led by Anna-Maria Meister at the Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florenz – Max-Planck-Institut. "Coded Objects" as method of refraction questions any assumptions of "neutral" technology or immaterial bureaucracy. Instead, the Lise Meitner Group examines how processes form values through objects—and how objects inform processes in societies.

Website: https://www.khi.fi.it/de/forschung/lise-meitner-group-meister/index.php
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Reference:

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