Art vs Tech:
Subversive Relations

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Should both art and technology always be progressive and contribute to mainstream technoculture? How about a subversive and tactical usage of technology that art makes possible? These are the key questions of this essay, but first, let me begin with a disclaimer. Using "versus" in the title is not about creating a binary opposition, but rather an excuse to think about common fields and the creative potential that results from the relation between art and technology. It is so because of a paradox: the more we try to convince ourselves about the unity of art and technology, the more we enhance the dualism and keep the "versus" aspect alive. Even if technology is becoming second nature, there are so many notions regarding similar issues in art that rely on it: post-media art, post-Internet art, speculative design, *sousveillance* art, generative art, glitch art, or critical engineering. It is not possible to discuss all of these here, but what they do have in common is the relation between art and various technologies. Art & Tech then? But there is a catch there too.

As Olia Lialina recently noticed, the figure of speech "Art & Tech" is becoming obsolete, because the "[…] constant repetition of the world 'technology' instead of 'computers' sedates us and makes us forget that the system we hold in our hands is a

programmable one" (137). By becoming actively involved in re-programming and tinkering, artists are able to avoid being just consumers and also go beyond being prosumers.

Polish researcher Marcin Składanek, writing on generative art, claims that the most interesting contemporary projects take place in a so-called "grey zone" between art and design (232). The value of art and design in relation to technology is not about inventing new gadgets that maintain consumption. According to many artists, tech-related art is not about supporting technology in a straightforward way, but about subverting it in order to provoke critical questions or even hacking.

A series of questions might help in identifying the problem and finding a solution, maybe by using the "wisdom of crowds" (Surowiecki). Sometimes the belief that such a wisdom is genuine may be slightly subverted, like in the project *The Ethical Things* by Simone Rebaudengo, who comments on the Internet of Things and collective human intelligence. The project is described as: "an exploration of the implications of the huge amount of data available and mundane objects that might become 'smarter'. It's a system that uses collaboration between a fan and crowdsourced ethical reasoning to help the object overcome complex daily dilemmas" (Rebaudengo).

The first sentence sounds serious, but the second one is rather ironic, as is much of the project. This is the idea of speculative design, a genre that dares to ask critical questions by producing seemingly useless objects. One of the leading collectives within this field, that deals with this notion of speculative design, is London-based Superflux. As Anab Jain, one of its members, explains, they are "bringing aspects of the imagined future to life" (Jain) just to test them and generate questions, for example about the aspect of surveillance in our daily life. So

this future may be utopian as well as dystopic. That is why we are talking about *sousveillance* art here, as it stands against surveillance by revealing the way it is conducted.

Speculative designers think of technology in a subversive and often witty way. But they are often concerned with serious issues about privacy, data security, and even human rights. An example is the Berlin-based Critical Engineering Working Group. As they explain in their manifesto, "The Critical Engineer observes the space between the production and consumption of technology" (Oliver et al.). I suppose this space is a gap that an artist should always mind. A good example is the project *Harvest* (2017) by one of the collective's members, Julian Oliver. The short description of the project is as follows: "Wind energy used to mine cryptocurrency to fund climate research" (Oliver et al.).

However, the artistic usage of technology does not always have to be that advanced. Sometimes asking relatively simple questions may lead to unexpected but important results or even increased awareness of some important matters, as in the case of The Tactical Tech collective. According to their name, in which "tactical" (Michel de Certeau's term) means being actively but elastically involved in operations against dominating systems, they make difficult issues easier just by explaining their mechanisms or providing know-how to those in need through workshops and tutorials.

Another thing is not only bringing technology to the people, but also bringing together people from the fields of art and technology. A positive example is a project *Seven on Seven* by Rhizome, affiliated with New York's New Museum. For more than ten years they have organized a series of collaborative events which bring together seven media artists and seven people from business, IT, or science fields. As a result, they are supposed to develop and present a project together, contributing to the field of "artistic research".

Why should an artist actually collaborate with a web developer, an engineer, or an IT start-up entrepreneur? Isn't this the "Art & Tech" cliché all over again? Well, as Marcin Składanek reminds us, "art helps us to adapt to upcoming transformations that might arrive unexpectedly" (17), because it enables to reveal the hidden curriculum of technoculture and allows us recognize critically the things that we might otherwise blindly accept.

Just to summarize, is this short essay supposed to argue that art – understood as creating useless objects, or creating for the purpose of aesthetic values only – should act against technology (understood, on the other hand, as creating useful objects that have a purpose)? Not at all. Art often happens to be against tech but only when tech is understood as gadgets. But technology is more than that. Interesting things start to happen when art relies on technology, and this may help provoke critical questions and raise awareness about serious contemporary issues. Art speaks the language of paradoxes much better because it is art's native language.

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