BECOMING.A(THING) : A SEMIOTIC INSTRUMENT Š PELA PETRIČ AND MIHA TURŠ IČ

BECOMING A.(THING), FINDING MEANING WHERE THERE IS NONE …

by Annick Bureaud

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'Exascale supercomputing' the word in itself is in-between utterly mysterious and slightly frightening, intimidating for sure. So is the title of the artwork *Becoming a.(Thing)* by Špela Petrič and Miha Turšič.

Humanity landed itself on the Moon with less computer power than in the processor of our washing machines and now we find ourselves with those massive parallel computers crunching info and data like soap bubbles but needing a whole power plant to power them and a glacier to cool them. Which sense does it make? Supercomputing is runing after a fantasy which is building a computer that could be equivalent to a human brain. Of course, the result would

not be an artificial human because humans have carbon-based biological bodies and think also with/through them. Which sense does it make?

How do you create *art* with/about supercomputer and supercomputing? For sure the machines are gorgeous and make fabulous pictures but they are not truly directly 'useable' in/for an art project. Petrič and Turšič's answer presents itself as an audiovisual performative installation.

When entering the room we see a whole set of technical equipments ranging from computers, screens of all size, large video projections, microphones, cameras, some are more exotic ones such as a microscope and here and there some props like books or an ultrasound scanner. A dense mesh of cables is connecting the whole.

The installation is displaying images, videos, charts, texts, lines of codes on some computer screens, a typical computer voice, etc.

In short, it is something that looks familiar to a media art audience. Slowly, as we move around, we get fascinated and captivated. The display has this seductive flavor of complex technology. However, this does not look like entertainment but serious and meaningful, both in terms of art and science. There is something to be understood.

Becoming a.(Thing) is based on the ground function of computers that is processing data. But, instead of providing the algorithms with the data they are meant to interpret, any data becomes an input to any algorithm, the output of which becomes a new input for another algorithm. Which sense does it make?

Making sense is precisely what is at the core of supercomputing and of *Becoming a.(Thing)*, « Making sense in the (human) Animal and the Machine » to paraphrase a famous founding book of cybernetics [1].

By focusing on exhibiting processes and playing on/with absurdity, *Becoming a.(Thing)* puts in the forefront how we are becoming unable to understand how supercomputers are making sense of the (big) data we are feeding them with and therefore how we are loosing or might be loosing our capacity to discriminate potentially wrong results and interpretations ; how, no matter what, computers *are* making *reasonnable* sense from any information ; and how, anyhow we do make sense of anything. The nice thing is that even if you don't look closer, if you don't understand what is exactly going on in *Becoming*

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a.(Thing), it is still 'working' because as an audience you will project some sense or meaning onto it.

The artists are indeed adding a layer of translation and interpretation in this meaning-making process as, in a metatheatrical way, the whole work is showing the process of semiosis itself emerging from the dance between humans and their invented non-carbon based embodied languages.

Becoming a.(Thing) is a pure exhilarating pataphysical object and finding meaning where there is none is, actually, a non-sensical meaningfull process. Does it make sense? Yes.

Annick Bureaud, November 2017

[1] Norbert Wiener, *Cybernetics: Or Control and Communication in the Animal and the Machine*, 1948

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CREDITS

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