

FOREWORD

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In the past few years, the rapid evolution of AI has put technological advancement at the centre of public debate, feeding both utopian and dystopian, posthumanist and transhumanist fantasies – depending on one's perspective. While this hype often obscures the ways in which the new technologies further entrench capitalist exploitation and extraction – from the mass unemployment caused by the automation of (mostly white-collar and creative) work to the increasing and unchecked power of corporate monopolies, from the environmental impact of energy-hungry data centres to the violent wars of extraction over mineral resources (as the ongoing genocide in the Democratic Republic of Congo) – it also projects a narrow understanding of technology. Be it negative or positive, this conception of technology as external to the human lies on the same 'logical flaw' debunked by Gilbert Simondon in 1958 in *On the Mode of Existence of Technical Objects* – a contradictory attitude of culture which views the technical object as either 'pure assemblage of matter' or 'animated by hostile intentions' towards the human. If science and technology have developed in ways the French thinker might not have been able to anticipate, the age of AI and automation, more than ever, calls for a renewed understanding between the human and the machinic, one that does not privilege either the human or the technical object as Simondon advocated.

While not concerned with AI per se, the present issue of *Afterall* aims at reconsidering 'technology' as a multifarious category that is always embedded within and informed by the particular conditions of the geopolitical, cultural and environmental context in which it is used and developed. In a sense, this is a 'cosmotechanical' perspective, to borrow philosopher Yuk Hui's concept, one that tries to reconstruct an understanding of technology beyond the linear temporal axis of neoliberalism and beyond its restricted definition through Greek thought as *techne*. This move away from a Eurocentric concept of technology is also an opening to multiple perspectives which might shape what Hui calls 'technodiversity', an approach which, as he writes in *The Question Concerning Technology in China* (2016), 'aims to foreground material practice and material construction in order to attain a cosmological and historical understanding of the relation between the traditional and the modern, the local and the global, the Orient and the Occident'. Through this situated view and the critical practices of the artists analysed here, the following articles explore an array of disparate technologies: from AI and cyborgs to bioengineering and surfing.

The fascination and anxieties surrounding AI are explored by Li Qi in his feature on artist Lawrence Lek. Focusing mainly on Lek's two trilogies 'Sinofuturism' and

'Smart City', set respectively in virtual replicas of Singapore and Beijing, Qi coins the term 'futuristic chinoiserie' to compare the present moment of the global AI race with the fantastic visions of China that arose in post-Enlightenment Europe. As its historical counterpart, futuristic chinoiserie is a European imaginary, an orientalist projection in which past fascination has been replaced with fear and xenophobic sentiments. Yet, as Qi elaborates, in his being both outsider and insider, Lek (who is based in London and of Malaysian-Chinese descent) creates imaginaries that combine high-tech with Chinese traditions and Buddhist-Taoist paradigms – showing how technology is both enmeshed in global economic circuits and culturally coded through local beliefs and cosmologies.

From the CGI-rendered landscapes of Singapore and SimBeijing, Ingrid Pui Yee Chu leads us to another Asian city whose skyline has often served as a futuristic backdrop in films and videogames: Hong Kong. Charting the transformation of the city from a manufacturer of electronics in the 1970s to a trading hub for tech gadgets produced in mainland China from the 2010s onwards, Chu looks at how a number of Hong Kong-based artists have incorporated technological apparatuses (including outdated and obsolete media) as a material component and a formal inspiration in their IRL interactive installations.

Lee Bul's practice has long unsettled the boundaries between body, machine and ornament. From visceral performances in the late 1980s and 90s to her *Monster* and *Cyborg* sculptures, she stages the female body as fragmented, abject and hybrid, at the intersection of power, gender and technology. Christin Yu re-reads Lee's textile-based materialities –sequins, silks, polyurethane – as sites where industrial labour, feminist critique and cybernetic imaginaries converge. Situating Lee within histories of South Korea's authoritarian modernisation, colonialism and global techno-Orientalist projections, Yu shows how her alternative ontologies of decorative beings and cyborgs embody both resistance to and entanglement with the modern technological order. This section on Lee Bul is complemented by archival documentation of the artist's participation in the exhibition 'ssack' organised in 1995 at Art Sonje Center in Seoul, situating her practice within the history of exhibitions in South Korea.

Artists Revital Cohen and Tuur Van Balen have long worked to expose through poetic acts of short-circuiting the planetary networks in which digital technologies are materially implicated – from extraction sites in the Democratic Republic of Congo to assembly lines in East Asia. In her essay, Filipa Ramos zeroes in on one important strand in the London-based artist duo's oeuvre: animal-human relationships. The legacy of Descartes' conception of animals as mindless automata persists today not just in the dioramas of taxidermised wildlife found in museums, but also in everyday practices such as pet-rearing and forced sterilisation, as well as in less diffused and still developing bioengineering research. From critical projects that reproduce the human management of animal life to later works that seem to collapse the boundaries between humanity and animality, Cohen and Van Balen, as Ramos elaborates, reveal the complex relationships of control, affection and sympoiesis that bind us to our more-than-human companions.

In conversation with *Afterall* editors Nav Haq and Adeena Mey, Korean artist Sojung Jun discusses her fascination with the different temporalities that co-exist in contemporary Asia: the syncretic combination of modernity and tradition, human-time and plant-time, different musical tempos and so on. Asia is seen as a site of plasticity: a zone deformed by the violent experiences of colonisation, imperialism, modernisation and capitalist development, and yet unbroken. Plasticity is also an apt marker to describe the artist's method which seamlessly moves between physical and immaterial media, and which finds in the wayward figures of nomads, women, the exiled, and revolutionary poets paths of flight that escape the singular speed of modernity.

In 'The Waves of the Black Atlantic', sociologist Joël Vacheron traces the sonic and cultural resonances of the Black Atlantic through surfing, music and diasporic imaginaries. Moving between histories of colonial trade, cultural hybridisation and contemporary sound practices, and foregrounding Black Atlantic experiences, the essay rethinks technology and modernity not as universal but as entangled with displacement, fluidity and embodied practices of survival and creativity across oceans.

In 'Not Silencing: Im Heung-soon's Cambodia', Adeena Mey reflects on the political and pedagogical significance of Im Heung-soon's documentary *Factory Complex* (2014–15), underscoring how the film reveals transnational dimensions of labour exploitation, linking struggles of South Korean and Cambodian women workers while resisting Western-centric narratives. Read against the British documentary *A Cambodian Spring* (2017), Im's work emerges as a more critical practice of representation, granting agency to marginalised voices and situating labour within wider socio-political contexts.

Curator Nicolas Vamvouklis explores Flaka Haliti's practice, which dismantles the visual codes of militarisation and nationalism in the post-Yugoslav context. Her installations and sculptural interventions recycle the materials and symbols of war – such as concrete barriers and camouflage. Vamvouklis discusses how Haliti's work stages what she calls 'demilitarisation of aesthetics', destabilising rigid categories of identity, belonging and power, while proposing more open imaginaries for a future beyond conflict and domination.

Finally, art historian Dorota Jagoda Michalska examines Kateryna Lysovenko's works in the context of debates on decolonisation, de-communisation and de-russification of Ukrainian cultural spaces and heritage. Focusing on Lysovenko's recent work set in the ancient Greek city of Tyras on the Black Sea, Michalska argues that her practice challenges any straightforward understanding of decolonisation and proposes instead a different – syncretic and archaeological – approach to the multifaceted cultural influences that have shaped Ukraine since the early modern era. Instead of looking for an 'indigenous' or 'pure' Ukrainian identity and art, Lysovenko embraces the diversity of ancient, Ottoman, Russian and Soviet visual languages to create images of not only violence but also change and transmutation that point toward different futures.