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LITERATURE, ART, ARTIFICIALITY: POST-MEDIA RELATIONS IN GOLDIN+SENNEBY'S *HEADLESS*

Abstract: Wójtowicz focuses on post-media art strategies and the manner in which meaningful relationships are both built up and undermined by such artworks (this includes literature and the visual arts, as well as performative and interdisciplinary works, and potentially interactive narratives as well). Multidirectional relations are established between the realms of narrative, literary fiction and two parallel realities: the world of everyday life and the space of electronic information. The main case study is Goldin+Senneby's *Headless* (2007-), which is comprised of a book, a ghostwriter, a blog, an exhibition, a docu-fictional narration and an academic analysis with some speculative elements. This (art)ificial narrative has begun to operate in real life, leaking beyond the boundaries of the artwork. Borrowing Angus Cameron's term, this creates a "xenospace", a concept that is connected to the ideas of Georges Bataille. Further case studies consider works by Tyler Coburn and James Bridle. Wójtowicz demonstrates how contemporary post-media artists have abandoned their "natural" sphere of visibility. In so doing, they have begun to operate within the realm of language, code, literature, and theoretical discourse. They also exploit certain temporal strategies, such as the moving image, performance and spectacle.

Keywords: post-media art, artificiality, headless, ghostwriter, Goldin+Senneby, novel, xenospace, offshore, fiction, literature, self-referential, avatar

This article takes as its main case study the interdisciplinary project *Headless* by Swedish artists' duo Goldin+Senneby, a project that has been evolving since 2007. It points to some of the post-media relations that are established therein; relations that are established between the realms of narrative, literary fiction and two parallel realities: the realm of everyday life and the space of electronic information. *Headless* bears some relation to other projects that are based on interlacing artificial agents (e.g. those which are computing-based) and natural agents (e.g. those which are human-related). Artificiality is assumed to be a mediating factor in the reception of such work; it might also be a constitutive factor in its encoding. The aim of this paper therefore, is to examine the role of post-media attitudes in shaping a given artwork; this concerns both the building of meaningful relations and the questioning of those

same relations. This might concern literature and the visual arts, as well as performative, interdisciplinary and, potentially, interactive works.

In cultural discourse, the notion of the “post-media” emerged around the turn of the millennium; indeed, it was discussed by Félix Guattari in 1996.¹ The post-media condition was recognised by Rosalind Krauss as early as 1999, and she later developed her ideas in the 2006 work *Two Moments from the Post-Medium Condition*.² At almost the same time, in 2005 Peter Weibel curated the *Postmedia Condition* and theorised the “mediated experience.”³ Alongside all this, Lev Manovich has been attempting to build a theoretical foundation for post-media aesthetics since 2001.⁴ Currently, our understanding of post-media might be said to be grounded in various legacies: the legacy of media and communication studies (Piotr Celiński) as well as the tradition of art historical research (Erika Balsom). Some authors point to a certain crisis in media (Alexander R. Galloway, Brad Troemel), or a division between the notions of new media art and post-media art (Domenico Quaranta). At the same time, Christiane Paul has declared that the post-media condition is based on “artistic practice that fuses digital into traditional media.”⁵

For the purposes of this study, the latter view is most compliant with my understanding of post-media art. As a consequence, I have applied the broadest possible definition of post-media attitudes; this refers to a state of mind, a method of acting according to the logic of everyday mediated experience extrapolated to the offline world. Consequently, there is always a circuitous detour leading to the expected artistic results. Looking to the title of this paper, the ‘art-’ in ‘artificial’ is thus not merely wordplay, a pretext for thinking about artistic activities as the means for creating a form of artificial construct. Something that is ‘artificial’ means something that is “made, produced, or done to seem like something natural,”⁶ but it is also a realm that is more vulnerable to fiction and speculation. Therefore—drawing on a real experience but improvising in the world of art—this construct enables us to ask questions about so-called artificiality.⁷

¹ F. Guattari, “Postmodern Deadlock and Post-Media Transition Soft Subversions” (1996), in: idem, *Texts and Interviews 1977-1985*, transl. Ch. Wiener, E. Witman, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009.

² See: R. Krauss, “*A Voyage on the North Sea*”: *Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition*, London–New York, Thames & Hudson, 1999; idem, “Two Moments from the Post-Medium Condition”, *October* 2006, no. 116 (Spring), pp. 55-62.

³ P. Weibel, “The Post-media Condition”, in: *AAVV, Postmedia Condition*, Madrid: Centro Cultural Conde Duque, 2006, p. 98.

⁴ The concept of the book planned by L. Manovich under the title *Post-media Aesthetics*, has been later redefined into *Software Takes Command*, New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013.

⁵ Ch. Paul, in: P. Johnson, “Finally, a Semi-Definitive Definition of Post-Internet Art”, *Art F City*, 14.10.2014, <http://artfcity.com/2014/10/14/finally-a-semi-definitive-definition-of-post-internet-art/> [accessed 2017-05-26].

⁶ Merriam-Webster Dictionary online: <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/artificial> [accessed 2016-07-15].

⁷ Understood as something temporarily agreed on and different from anything ‘natural’ or easily recognizable as such, artificiality is also a feature that may be evaluated differently, depending on the given criteria.

Despite its pejorative connotations, artificiality can also be simulated to a greater or lesser extent, even, in some instances, creating a fiction in its own right. In the context of this discussion, however, this state—seemingly natural and at once unnatural—is not meant to be related to notions of artificial intelligence (AI) or the idea of the “Uncanny Valley”. We are left with an important question: What if the artificial narrative starts to operate in real life (IRL), leaking out from its artworld-bound framework?

Do novels write themselves?

Goldin+Senneby’s *Headless* (2007-) is a project that possesses a truly multimodal form. First of all, it is a book with various plots and an open approach towards storytelling. As a performative art project, it is also durational, linking the real world and the “white cube” of the gallery space. Furthermore, it is interactive, a form of an executive protocol in the way that we might expect from a functional computing code. Yet it operates in realms between literary narration, economic reality and mysterious (offshore) entities.

For these reasons, when the project was included in the exhibition *The Book Lovers*, curators Joanna Zielińska and David Maroto tagged the work “Novel Writes Itself.”⁸ The curators’ label denotes one of the work’s key features: it is a generative, self-writing novel with many authors, each substituted for another. An account of the work’s open, developing structure appears in the project/book description:

Every time, when a new chapter is finished, there follows a public event: A performance, a guided tour, an exhibition, a secret meeting, and so on. Whatever happens during such event becomes fictionalized and is the material for the next novel’s chapter. And whoever happens to be present at the event might become a new character in the story. The art project functions as writing technique. It is a kind of device that produces the narrative text.⁹

Created over the span of eight years, *Headless* therefore was not only a truly ongoing interdisciplinary project; in my opinion, it may also be perceived as a form of self-executing code.¹⁰ The only difference from a computational code is that the code of *Headless* was running and operating (thus: making changes) in the “real” world of post-media life. We should also however remember that a self-executing code might be dangerous, might actually be a virus. If, theoretically, the autonomy

⁸ The exhibition took place in the Museum of Contemporary Art in Antwerp, Belgium, from 6th December 2012 to 21st April 2013. More: <http://ensembles.mhka.be/events/the-book-lovers-a-project-about-artist-novels>.

⁹ See: <http://ensembles.mhka.be/items/12410> [accessed 2016-07-15].

¹⁰ From 2007, until the book was published in March 2015; firstly announced as early as in 2009 as *Looking for Headless*. Kaya Genç uses the title *Headless by K.D.* On the website of *Book Lovers* project the date of publication is 2014; the actual date is March 2015. There are some discrepancies in the dates and titles regarding the project.

of a code leads to potential dangers, are there any other displays of the code that may be foreknown?

The story around (and, at the same time: within) *Headless* is multi-layered and complicated. It may be, as Rachel Wetzler calls it following Alexander Provan, a form of “Reality TV.”¹¹ We might look for its origin in the thought of the French surrealist, philosopher and scandalous novelist Georges Bataille. Bataille was involved in a secret society that is now believed to be extinct, with the pertinent name of *Acéphale* (in English, literally “Headless”). The mysterious and mythical beginnings of the contemporary artwork can be linked to the visual aspect of a magazine bearing the same name as the secret society, which ran from 1936 to 1939. The cover of one of only five known issues was designed by French surrealist painter André Masson, who was apparently inspired by the famous image of a Vitruvian Man, depicted as a headless creature. The medieval *Travels of Sir John Mandeville*, a book that was believed to be a travel memoir but was rather a fantasy, might also be a source of inspiration. In Mandeville’s fantastical travelogue, the narrator journeys to Prester John’s Kingdom, among other places, where he encounters a mysterious headless creature.¹² A further possible influence, in 1599 Sir Walter Raleigh described headless strangers in his book *The Discovery of Guiana*.¹³

In contrast to Mandeville’s apparent experiences and Raleigh’s “biography”, in the contemporary art project, the state of being headless is also interpreted as being decapitated (as was also presumed to be the case in Bataille’s *Acéphale* society). The dangerous idea of decapitation in a metaphorical sense would recur in another Goldin+Senneby project, the 2010 work *The Decapitation of Money* (2010). Therein, the artists draw connections with their previous *Headless* project, this time focusing on “the very nature of money changed from a symbolic value to a virtual one”. Accordingly, in this work, “Money entered a new space of exteriority, beyond the control of the sovereign state. Money was decapitated.”¹⁴

We are reminded of the idea of decapitation and, thus, some kind of a withdrawal in the name of a contemporary offshore company, Headless Ltd., a company that was supposedly registered in 2007 in a well-known tax haven, the Bahamas. The company is purportedly a branch of The Sovereign Group (alternatively, according to John Barlow’s blog, The Sovereign Trust), “a management company catering to high-net-

¹¹ R. Wetzler, “The Reality TV Novel: Goldin+Senneby’s ‘Headless’ Also Lacks a Soul, but That’s Probably the Point”, *Artnews*, 4.05.2015, online: <http://www.artnews.com/2015/05/04/the-reality-tv-novel-goldinsennebys-headless-also-lacks-a-soul-but-thats-probably-the-point/> [accessed 2016-07-15].

¹² This issue is present in a work from a series *Ewaipanoma* (2015) by Juan Sebastián Peláez, exhibited in a form of a giant photo-cutout of a headless woman, (the pop singer Rihanna) with her face features on her chest, during the 9th Berlin Biennale (2016). The Venezuelan artist has been exploring the concept of ‘exotic’ Ewaipanoma character in various celebrity-related images (football players, actors, etc.).

¹³ Sir Raileigh has been decapitated in 1618.

¹⁴ See: <http://www.goldinsenneby.com/gs/?p=132> [accessed 2016-07-15].

worth individuals and corporations who wish to avoid paying taxes.”¹⁵ According to the narrative of the *Headless* project, on the Bahamas, the organization and its possible connection with Bataille is being investigated by ghost-writer John Barlow, who has been instructed to write a docu-fictional novel ordered by Goldin+Senneby. Barlow, setting off to the Bahamas in March 2008, starts his own travel blog about the journey.¹⁶ A few days later, a guided tour around London is conducted, relating to Barlow’s revelations.

The forensic approach is clear from the very first paragraph of Barlow’s blog: “The blog will in fact report on some of the work I’ll be doing whilst I’m on the island. It will also serve as a kind of insurance policy, a statement of intent, in case anything happens to me.”¹⁷ Carrying a copy of Bataille’s *Encyclopedia Acephalica*, Barlow starts to perform his duties, being slightly anxious about his relationship with his Swedish paymasters: “I would act as a blind recipient of research material, and construct narratives around the information available to me. Their broader ambitions are unknown to me. I am simply writing a novel for them.”¹⁸ Barlow wanders around Nassau, searching for one of the IBCs (International Business Companies) that would offer: “Total anonymity, with no public register of shareholders or directors.”¹⁹ Such companies have often been accused of so-called money laundering or simply of being connected to rich tax exiles. The lack of directors also means that, legally speaking, they are—literally—headless.

As might be expected, the story is mysterious and complicated, and it clearly makes use of certain clichés. One such cliché is the character of Barlow himself: an investigative writer in an exotic country who is searching for something that is as mysterious to him as it is to the reader. Another cliché concerns the supposed truth of such a travelogue. Both the character of Barlow and the blog he purportedly writes might just be fictions, even if Alexander Provan claims to have talked to Barlow via Skype.²⁰ All the same, Provan’s preface to *Headless* ends with him being actually chosen by an already absent Barlow to be the author of the book.

All in all, the whole novel slowly grows bigger than literature. It seems to be leaking out of its literary framework, taking the shape of a blog, an academic lecture (maybe even a lecture-performance), a critical analysis, a documentary and several exhibitions, to name just a few. One of the possible versions of the project was part

¹⁵ Ibidem.

¹⁶ J. Barlow, *Gone Offshore*, 2008 <https://www.travelblog.org/Central-America-Caribbean/Bahamas/Nassau/blog-259665.html> [accessed 2016-07-15].

¹⁷ Ibidem.

¹⁸ Ibidem. The Barlow’s blog starts from March, 23rd, 2008 and ends on April 4th, 2008, while the last login comes from February 5th, 2010.

¹⁹ Ibidem.

²⁰ A. Provan, *Headless Commercial Thriller*, https://www.canopycanopycanopy.com/contents/headless_commercial_thriller [accessed 2016-07-15].

of a 2016 exhibition entitled *Nervous Systems*.²¹ There, Goldin+Senneby were represented by a black and white etching called *Nassau 6AM* (2008). Commissioned by the duo and made by Swedish artist Johan Hjerpe, *Nassau 6AM* shows a headless man running on a beach with a dog.²²

Simon Goldin and Jakob Senneby have claimed that they accidentally stumbled across Sovereign and later met its representative in order to establish their own offshore company (allegedly, this is also the source of the initials of their “ghostwriting” author, K.D.²³). This is illustrative of the way in which the Swedish artists started to weave a subtle yet multidimensional network around their project:

Goldin and Senneby recruited a cast of collaborators from various fields who would carry out different aspects of the search for Headless Ltd. on their behalf, including Angus Cameron, a geographer at Leicester University who has written extensively on offshore finance; intellectual property lawyer Pia Sarma; filmmakers Kate Cooper and Richard John Jones, who created a documentary about the project, *Looking For Headless* (2010); Swedish curator Kim Einarsson; and John Barlow, a British ghostwriter and mystery novelist. In addition to those who explicitly agree to collaborate, there are dozens more who participate unknowingly or unwillingly, like K.D., whom the artists hired a private detective to follow around Gibraltar; her full name was apparently redacted from the novel after Sovereign’s lawyers sent Goldin+Senneby a cease and desist letter.²⁴

As we can see, all of the aforementioned people are involved in the project, so whom can we really trust when we struggle to encode the *Headless* project? It seems that Goldin+Senneby operate within the reality of their project in a thorough way, which is reminiscent of the artistic tactics applied by Sophie Calle or Maurizio Cattelan: that is, they orchestrate reality and follow certain, systematic and objective pathways through that reality, with an emphasis of artificiality. As the curators of *The Book Lovers* explain, their endeavour to research artists’ novels—using a textual, literary form on the verge of ‘regular’ art—might be perceived as the “re-skilling of art practice.”²⁵

²¹ The exhibition *Nervous Systems. Quantified Life and the Social Question* was curated by Stephanie Hankey, Marek Tuszynski and Anselm Franke from the TacticalTech Collective and took place in Haus der Kulturen der Welt in Berlin between March 11th and May 9th, 2016.

²² “The artists entered the etching into for Sovereign’s annual art prize. The work made it to the final round and was purchased by a Norwegian collector for \$3,000.” See: A. Provan, *Headless Commercial Thriller*, op. cit.

²³ According to R. Wetzler, K.D. may stand for either Kara Donnelly, Kate Dent or Kelly Duncan, one of the names that were supposed to be mentioned by Gibraltar-based Sovereign representative.

²⁴ Ibidem.

²⁵ See: <http://ensembles.mhka.be/events/what-happens-when-the-artwork-becomes-a-novel?locale=en> [accessed 2016-07-15]. However, the idea of re-skilling as a form of change of artist’s status and the process of her professional education, discussed by Tyler Coburn, has surprisingly lot in common with the play with art market that Goldin+Senneby undertake. As Alexander Provan writes: “Goldin and Senneby were recognized and rewarded handsomely for their stew of esoteric theory and faux-investigative journalism, in the form of exhibitions and prizes, glowing reviews, and escalating prices.

The highly artificial and multidimensional structure created by the Swedish duo seems to identify loose ends without trying to tie them up. As project character and co-narrator John Barlow puts it: “Goldin and Senneby were obsessed with *the process*. They used that term constantly; everything was about maintaining an allegiance to *the process*.”²⁶ What is this process then? Is it, as Cameron calls it, a theoretical model? Is it a story with many actors and actants²⁷ all working on the symbolic capital to be gained by Goldin+Senneby? Is it, finally, a form of self-writing novel or an example of self-referential literature? The artists do not give clear answers, avoiding such answers as much as they avoid a straightforward presence in the artworld. They for example underline the fact that they are not interested in the forensic investigation of offshore companies, the manner in which the financial crisis betrayed the “virtuality” of money.²⁸ It seems that what is more interesting to them is the aspects of fiction that relate to the form of artificiality; this includes the possibility of creating open stories and assembling a polylogue of contradictory voices, while also adopting an interdisciplinary approach.

This is probably why—in the context of a discussion about the act of withdrawal (a form of decapitation in the artworld, one might say) and the absence of an artist in the case of Goldin+Senneby—Angus Cameron has flagged the striking artificiality of every character involved in *Headless*. Quoting K.D. (the fictional author of *Looking for Headless*), he places the identity of John Barlow into question: “So what was he, the writer John Barlow? A joke, a bodily presence that merely emphasized the absence of the artists? And what about the novel? Was he still under contract to write a novel?”²⁹ Seems like the authorship is as ambiguous as the resulting artwork.

With all this said, we might now ask: what kind of tools will enable us to encode the content of *Headless* as a cultural and conceptual (and therefore, artificial) construct? Apparently, there is some kind of meta-level surrounding the whole project, although this should not be reduced to a type of shallow conspiracy theory. By accepting an academic as their almost-spokesperson (economic geographer Angus Cameron); by publishing their book with a fictional author (K.D.); and by, at the same time, presenting part of the project within the visual art world, Goldin+Senneby have

The right to become a secondary character in the novel was even auctioned by Christie’s in London on March 25, 2010, for \$8,398.” See: A. Provan, *Headless Commercial Thriller*, op. cit.; T. Coburn, *Re-skilling the Artist*, http://www.artandeducation.net/school_watch/despite-the-intentions-of-institutional-and-pedagogical-rhetoric/ [accessed 2016-07-15].

²⁶ Ibidem. The italics are used by Barlow himself.

²⁷ To use the famous term coined by Bruno Latour for the purposes of his actor-network theory.

²⁸ *Interview with Goldin+Senneby* by Brian Droitcour for Rhizome, 4.02.2009, <http://rhizome.org/editorial/2009/feb/04/interview-with-goldin+senneby/> [accessed 2016-07-15].

²⁹ K.D., *Looking for Headless*, 2012, p. 90, after A. Cameron, “Modelling ‘Headless’: Finance, Performance Art, and Paradox”, *Journal of Critical Globalisation Studies* 2014, iss. 7, p. 110, online: http://www.criticalglobalisation.com/Issue7/102_121_MODELLING_HEADLESS_JCGS7.pdf [accessed 2016-07-15].

obtained a multidimensional form. The internal discrepancies of the project seem to be its greatest asset, because these provide a performative, fictional and artificial quality to just about everything we can connect to *Headless*. If we still seek an answer, however, this can be partly found in the very title of one of the project pieces, exhibited at the Moderna Museet in Stockholm in 2010: *Headless: Each thing seen is the parody of another or is the same thing in a deceptive form*.³⁰ This title refers back to a quote from Bataille, who, as we have seen, inspired Goldin+Senneby's artistic approach and strategies from the outset.³¹

British academic Angus Cameron (one of the Goldin+Senneby collaborators, as we have seen) has described himself as being particularly interested in geographical, financial and conceptual “*xenospaces*—fictional but functional spaces of exteriority, ambiguity and indeterminacy.”³² In a paper delivered in Toronto in 2008, he explained his interest in the *Headless* project, which he also presented at that time; according to Cameron, his interests were rooted in the issue of a “*xeno-entity*”. Arguing that he was not, in fact, Goldin+Senneby's spokesperson (yet another contradiction), Cameron delivered his paper as a kind of lecture-performance, combining together shady areas of financial economies with certain metaphysical philosophies; this included the ideas of Bataille as well as those of Jean-Joseph Goux (the author of the 1970 work *Symbolic Economies*), and also the work of forgotten and politically-controversial German theorist Carl Schmidt.

In this way, Cameron has created an interesting connection between the interpretation of offshore financial tax havens, the metaphysical idea of “headlessness” and the actual artwork. Everything is in a sense “*xeno-*”; that is, external, imaginary and—last, but not least—artificial. The topic of artificiality is crucial here, because, as can be seen, this concept doesn't necessarily have to be connected with artificial intelligence or computing. Something is artificial when it is stipulated in advance or agreed upon collectively. The thing itself might be temporary, but it provides a valid base from which to proceed and create a real impact. The rough definition provided in the previous two sentences might be employed to describe ‘artificial’ realities; this includes art, but it also includes the economy, and money in particular. Ken Friedman has described money as “an early example of information artefact”. Moreover, in an essay that appears in the 1995 anthology *The Multimedia Text* (1995), he encourages us to “consider the issues of language and culture in three ways”. These are, respectively, the contextual, processual and definitional.³³

³⁰ See: <http://ensembles.mhka.be/items/12410/assets/26756> [accessed 2016-07-15].

³¹ The quote from *The Solar Anus* (1931) by Georges Bataille: “It is clear that the world is purely parodic, in other words, that each thing seen is the parody of another, or is the same thing in a deceptive form.” is used as a motto to Provan's preface to *Headless*. See: A. Provan, *Headless Commercial Thriller*, in: K.D., Goldin+Senneby, *Headless*, Triple Canopy, Sternberg Press and Tensta Konsthall, 2015.

³² See: <http://www2.le.ac.uk/departments/management/people/dr-angus-cameron> [accessed 2016-07-15].

³³ K. Friedman, “Language and Culture in the Information Age”, in: N. Zurbrugg (ed.), *The Multimedia Text*, London: Academy Editions, 1995, p. 59.

Like Friedman (and probably as a consequence of his work) Cameron also found common ground between two seemingly separate areas (art and the financial economy). Both are a kind of artificial, collectively agreed upon system. According to Cameron, it was quite easy to combine these two systems in an unusual way, reaching for other benchmarks, such as literature, geography and metaphysics. However, Cameron was speaking on the verge of a global economic crisis, which reportedly begun around 2007 or 2008. While Goldin+Senneby declared that they had no interest in the results of the global crash, the artistic exploration of offshore activities in projects like *Headless* became even more interesting in this light. Indeed, their strategy mimicked that of an offshore company, operating in an artworld that was afflicted by the crisis. This is probably why, in another paper on the same subject, Cameron developed this issue further, arguing that Goldin+Senneby's activities were, in fact, a form of abstract modelling. This enabled, as does every model, a sort of artificiality.³⁴ The only particularity is that "what *Headless* does is the opposite of the conventional model: it represents the 'noise', particularly the noise produced by the intersecting worlds of finance and contemporary art."³⁵

Cameron was not only involved in the *Headless* project as a performer, nor was he simply used to theorize the project from his academic perspective. He was also invited to write for the joint publication *Artist Novels*,³⁶ an anthology that reminds us that,

Visual artists create different strategies to integrate their novels into their practice. Introducing traits that are particular to narrative literature into the visual arts implies the accentuation of some features over others, such as narration, fiction, identification, and the act of reading and its protracted engagement, as well as distribution in public space. An artist's approach comes fundamentally from the visual arts.³⁷

We might agree that the attitude expressed here is artistic, but in what ways is it actually related to the notion of the post-media? One probable answer is: when it operates in real life and causes real effects, including the generation of profits. This was true in the case of Turkish novelist and critic Kaya Genç, who has described the moment when Goldin+Senneby contacted him: "The message appeared in the form of a banner on the screen of my iPad where I was reading *Headless by K.D.*, a novel with a large cast of characters that, as it happens, includes Goldin+Senneby. It felt a bit like receiving a letter from Baron de Charlus while reading *In Search of Lost*

³⁴ A. Cameron, "Modelling 'Headless'...", op. cit., p. 102.

³⁵ Ibidem, p. 104.

³⁶ See: A. Cameron, "Being Nothing: Paradox and Looking for Headless", in: J. Zielińska, D. Maroto (eds.), *Artist Novels*, New York: Sternberg Press, 2015. Copublished with Cricoteka in Kraków on the occasion of the exhibition "Reads Like a Book: The Book Lovers Project," January 23 – March 15, 2015.

³⁷ See: <http://www.sternberg-press.com/index.php%3FpageId%3D1546%261%3Den%26book-Id%3D440%26sort%3Dyear> [accessed 2016-07-15].

Time.”³⁸ So it is as if the participants in the mysterious projects by Goldin+Senneby are selected as if from behind the scenes—authors, artists, critics and other actors. It seems that Cameron is correct in claiming that, in their analysis of offshore structures, the Swedish artistic duo themselves acts in a manner that makes use of offshore strategies.

The *Headless* project may then be perceived as a speculative and performative utterance; but in what ways is this art form deceptive? As I have sought to indicate here, the *Headless* project weaves a subtle, post-media network out of the visual and performative arts, literature (particularly fiction), investigative journalism and economics. The key issue is a kind of artificiality or even untruth that underlies every part of the project: the ghost-writer K.D. is supposed to write the novel; John Barlow’s contribution is also supposed to be ‘real’; and Goldin+Senneby are supposed to be characters in the novel. The actual book was published in the ‘real’ world, so it may be perceived as both fiction and the result of a forensic investigation. It seems that the public presence of the project, including the manner in which *Headless* has been theorized and critiqued, is actually a part of the project itself. Therefore, as readers and viewers, we cannot really distinguish that which is truth from that which is a deceptive construct. The language doesn’t help us at all; as Alexander R. Galloway argues, we live in a world of protocols that operate in a functional manner.³⁹ As a consequence, why not see *Headless* as a form of such a protocol: executive, artificial and potentially always in progress?

Xenospeaking as a form of a protocol

In literature and the visual arts (particularly in conceptual and post-conceptual art) self-referentiality is already a recognised phenomenon. The notion of self-referentiality may, of course, remind us of certain post-modern literary experiments: Italo Calvino’s work is probably the most famous example. Actually, a metaphor of a house of mirrors, noticed by a Kaya Genç in the case of *Headless* book launch event, is just another name for the same conceptual structure⁴⁰.

Tyler Coburn’s *Naturally Speaking* (2013-2014) is also situated at the intersection between literature, art and artificiality.⁴¹ The artwork has appeared in several versions: as a chapter in the anthology *You Are Here—Art after the Internet* (2014),⁴² as a sculptural installation at the *La Voix Humaine* exhibition at the Kunstverein

³⁸ K. Genç, “A Novel Without a Head”, *The Believer*, 9.11.2015, online: <http://logger.believermag.com/post/132877068799/a-novel-without-a-head> [accessed 2016-07-15].

³⁹ See: A.R. Galloway, *Protocol: How Control Exists after Decentralization*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004.

⁴⁰ K. Genç, “A Novel Without a Head”, op. cit.

⁴¹ See: <http://tylercoburn.com/works.html> [accessed 2016-07-15].

⁴² T. Coburn, “Naturally Speaking”, in: O. Kholeif (ed.), *You Are Here – Art After the Internet*, Manchester–London: Cornerhouse/SPACE, 2014, pp. 156-165.

München (2014), and as the basis for a performance by Susan Bennett (2015). This last figure is an American dubbing actress, whose voice is used for the character of “Siri” in Apple’s “intelligent, personal assistant” interface.⁴³ Bennett was a guest performer at Coburn’s presentation of *Naturally Speaking* at New York’s Judson Memorial Church,⁴⁴ where she read the text aloud. Her voice, familiar to most of the audience as one that is associated with a certain interface, began to slowly lose its connection with nonhuman artificiality.

Just like the *Headless* project, this self-referential work again involves ‘real’ agents. And we can clearly see the work’s post-media qualities. Bennett’s speech constitutes an articulation of artificiality; such artificiality is borrowed from the kind of speech-recognition software that forces a human being to adjust her way of speaking to the conditions offered by a machine. As a result, an unusual kind of post-human and ‘foreign’ way of speaking emerges. Following Cameron, we may think of it as a form of ‘xeno-speech’. In this case, the xenospeaker operates in a particular field of fiction that is enabled by language but that is not recognised as literature. As James Bridle aptly notes: “20 of the top 30 contributors to the online encyclopaedia are pieces of software, quietly shaping our systems of knowledge alongside us. As we come to understand the role these other authors play in narrative and reality, our sense of the reliability of text, of authorship, thins and shakes.”⁴⁵ In the context of the same discussion about the future of literature, the novel and language, Alexander Provan states that,

We don’t *need* algorithmic literature or refresh-ready tweet-books. In fact, it seems important to maintain some distance from the world of apps, some tension between our hyper-mediated daily experiences and the forms we use to represent them [...]. What we *do* need [...] is a way to process the spectral standards that buffet us; new languages, or at least styles of speaking, to describe the invisible infrastructures and technological protocols that order human interaction, so as to avoid submitting to their dictates.⁴⁶

Coburn’s text allows us to easily filter the actual content from the punctuation marks; these are capitalized and therefore stand out from the text: “COMMA”, “PERIOD”, “OPEN QUOTE”, “CLOSE QUOTE”. In the very process of reading, therefore, we can distinguish the ‘natural’ content from its ‘artificial’ framework, although the latter is necessary for a computer to mimic that which is ‘natural’, for it to recognize speech. The whole experience becomes a little uncanny; as Karen Archey sees the matter, it is as uncanny as the features of speech-recognition software itself.⁴⁷

⁴³ See: <https://support.apple.com/pl-pl/HT204389> [accessed 2016-07-15].

⁴⁴ The event took place on March 29th, 2015 as a part of *User Agent* event, curated by Rachel Valinsky.

⁴⁵ J. Bridle, “Future Fictions”, *Frieze Magazine* 2013, iss. 156 (June-August), online: <https://frieze.com/article/future-fictions/> [accessed 2016-07-15].

⁴⁶ Ibidem.

⁴⁷ K. Archey, “In Focus – Tyler Coburn”, *Frieze Magazine*, iss. 161, 12.03.2014, online: <https://frieze.com/article/focus-tyler-coburn?language=de>.

This is probably why Coburn has reached for so many resources, equating them all within the work: from Rabelais to Edison, from de Certeau to *MacSpeech Dictate International*.⁴⁸ Everything is connected to the topic of shaping the way human beings communicate verbally over the course of history.

Multimedia-based literature already has, of course, a prolific history. This history has been documented in publications like *The Multimedia Text* (1995), in which scholars and artists tried to grasp the landscape of multimedia art, a landscape that was rapidly evolving during a decade that was so formative for electronic literature and the media arts. Looking to Coburn's installation two decades on, the structure we see is now post-multimedia: it contains a video showing a block of melting ice in the shape of Pantagruel's ship, pop-up windows containing paragraphs of the text, and a piece of furniture that is reminiscent of twentieth-century design. And there is the voice—the voice of a human actor in the role of actant for artificial intelligence.

Artificial screenplays for human actors

In the late of spring 2016, a science fiction movie trailer went viral under the title *Sunspring*.⁴⁹ Its three characters (called H, H2 and C) were placed in an imaginary reality that was recognizable as a sci-fi B-movie. The trailer involved a weird plot, and the dialogue was strikingly artificial, even absurd. This was the case because the movie was described as being “authored by a recurrent neural network called long short-term memory, or LSTM for short.”⁵⁰ This means that the entire screenplay was written by an artificial intelligence; a bot called AI, who—in a wave of self-awareness—actually started calling himself Benjamin.⁵¹ The whole conceit of the movie was the result of the purposes for which it was shot: the Sci-Fi London Festival's *48-Hour Film Challenge*.⁵² The algorithm remixed a given set of data, in this case a set of clichés from the sci-fi genre. We might then ask the following question: Is AI/“Benjamin” still an author? Is he much different from the variety of authors hiding one behind the other in the case of *Headless*, or in the scientific compilation of

⁴⁸ See: <http://www.newmuseum.org/blog/view/voice-naturallyspeaking> [accessed 2016-07-15].

⁴⁹ “To train Benjamin, Goodwin fed the AI with a corpus of dozens of sci-fi screenplays he found online—mostly movies from the 1980s and 90s. Benjamin dissected them down to the letter, learning to predict which letters tended to follow each other and from there which words and phrases tended to occur together.” See: A. Newitz, “Movie Written by Algorithm Turns Out To Be Hilarious and Intense”, *Ars Technica*, 9.06.2016, <http://arstechnica.com/the-multiverse/2016/06/an-ai-wrote-this-movie-and-its-strangely-moving/>.

⁵⁰ Ibidem.

⁵¹ See: <https://www.docdroid.net/1CZ2fPA/sunspring-final.pdf.html> [accessed 2016-07-15].

⁵² See: <http://48hour.sci-fi-london.com/> [accessed 2016-07-15].

Naturally Speaking? As Annalee Newitz points out: “Benjamin exists somewhere in between author and tool, writer and regurgitator.”⁵³

A movie with a screenplay written by seemingly self-conscious algorithms may then be perceived as a deceptive parody, an amusing oddity because of its absurd dialogue and cultural clichés. But, as artist James Bridle notes, there are other scenarios written by algorithms that are not so much fun: “Softwares are made of language too; they are narratives, written by hand, and they shape the quotidian world more forcefully, perhaps, than any novel.”⁵⁴ Bridle also explicitly states that “our identities are determined by a faceless system.”⁵⁵ He is referring to a topic that he also addresses in his artistic practice by making use of holographic avatars.⁵⁶ The avatars, similar to information points found at airports or in other public spaces, are part of an installation by Bridle entitled *Homo Sacer* (2014). The avatars speak using quotations from UK, EU and UN legal documents, as well as from politicians. Of course, a holographic avatar is not a human being but an artificial entity; therefore, we can neither establish a dialogue with it or discuss its pre-programmed statements. With all this in mind, is art really capable of achieving what Nicolas Bourriard sought for it, the potential for “reprogramming the world?”⁵⁷ In the age of data harvesting, shouldn’t art instead be thought of as a form of resistance against the overabundant scheme of ready-to-use templates?

In his essay *Living on the Electromagnetic Border*, quoted above, Bridle writes about immigrants, asylum seekers, and the exteriority of border zones with exceptional laws; this relates to “offshore processing centres” and the Australian Operation Sovereign Borders.⁵⁸ Surprisingly, he uses the same vocabulary as Goldin+Senneby, although the similarity must be pure coincidence. Is it also a coincidence, however, that the title of Bridle’s work *Homo Sacer* (2014) also links to the content of a much earlier lecture-performance by Angus Cameron?⁵⁹ Both Bridle and Cameron were clearly influenced by Giorgio Agamben, particularly his 1995 book *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Where Cameron pointed towards some sort of extramural (xeno)spaces and other xeno-qualities, Bridle seems equally interested in states of exception, exclaves and visibility. Further discussion of these issues would, nevertheless, pull us away from the topic of the paper, which instead needs to be summarized.

⁵³ A. Newitz, “Movie Written by Algorithms...”, op. cit.

⁵⁴ J. Bridle, “Future Fictions”, op. cit.

⁵⁵ J. Bridle, “Living on the Electromagnetic Border”, *Creative Time Reports*, 10.11.2014, <http://creativetimereports.org/2014/11/10/james-bridle-electromagnetic-border-zone/> [accessed 2016-07-15].

⁵⁶ J. Bridle, *Homo Sacer*, 2014, <http://shorttermmemoryloss.com/portfolio/project/homo-sacer/> [accessed 2016-07-15].

⁵⁷ N. Bourriard, *Postproduction. Culture as Screenplay: How Art Reprograms the World*, transl. J. Herman, New York: Lukas & Sternberg, 2002.

⁵⁸ J. Bridle, “Living on the Electromagnetic Border”, op. cit.

⁵⁹ J. Bridle, *Homo Sacer*, 8.07.2014, <http://booktwo.org/notebook/homo-sacer/> [accessed 2016-07-15].

My three case studies show that artificiality is embedded in the contemporary post-media artworld, although it may take various forms. The analysis of artificiality may be model-based (stretching the limits of a model as a theoretical exercise) or language-based (questioning the difference between that which is natural and unnatural, a distinction that is too often taken for granted). This is why a Bataillean ‘deceptive parody’ recurs in such works, but parody is not the ultimate goal here. The real question is rather more serious: what can be considered natural (as opposed to artificial) and how, therefore, can art produce artificial constructs that provoke critical thinking and discussion? Reminding us of the way in which art can help us to break through rigid protocols, every so often artists abandon their ‘natural’ sphere—the spatial, visual realm—in order to operate with the sphere of language, code, literature or some other form of temporal activity (moving image, performance, spectacle). The more artificial their voices sound, the more challenging the possible interpretations. Artificiality—incarnated as a fictional, system-related sort of inhuman avatar—is, after all, becoming more and more ‘natural’ in the contemporary post-media reality.

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