«Within technoliberalism, organizational and techno-logical performance are intertwined. Their merging allows for an even stronger demand for both humans and machines to perform with efficiency, one that goes beyond their respective capacities. Such is the par-adigm that will be called here ‹hyper-performativity›.»

TIME IS MONEY: ON HYPER-PERFORMATIVITY
Valentin Bansac

Valentin Bansac, born 1991, is an architect, researcher and photographer from France. Currently based in Paris as a part-time collaborator at Bruther, Valentin previously worked at OMA/AMO where he participated in «Countryside, the future». In 2021, he took part in the Venice Architecture Biennale as a contributor to the Luxembourg pavilion. Valentin's work ranges from architecture, installations, exhibitions, to writing and photography. He took part in the «Experimentation in Arts and Politics» program led by Frédérique Aït-Touati and Bruno Latour at the Paris Institute of Political Studies.

Time will tell.
Time flies.
Time goes by.
Time on my hands.
Time heals all wounds.
Time is relative.
Time is running out.
Time is like a river.
Time is precious.
Time is money. No other aphorism resonates as much in our collective imagination. The expression has superseded many cultural definitions of time in the current frenzy to optimize our lives. Even though it appeared previously in British culture, the saying «time is money» is generally attributed to the 1748 essay «Advice to a Young Tradesman» (1) by Benjamin Franklin, as a motto that later shaped American and global work culture. Understanding time as a question of performance within the neoliberal economy, this text aims at portraying the growing presence of computational technology within our contemporary relationship to labor and its implications in space.

In an increasing merging of workers with algorithms, working conditions are moving towards a form of technoliberalism. In such a context, the paradigm of «hyper-performativity» (2) erases the inherited distinctions between work and rest and shifts the understanding of technology as a tool for liberating humans from labor by reducing time to production.

Following the case of Amazon workers' dependence on high-tech equipment in the fulfillment center, the text studies hacktivism as a form of technological disobedience that offers an alternative way to perform and challenges contemporary structures of power and knowledge.

In his 2001 book called «Perform or Else: From Discipline to Performance», (3) Jon McKenzie proposes a general theory of performance as a tool to understand political dynamics within two main aspects of contemporary society: organization and technology. As computation, algorithms and machines are invading most realms of our lives including work, a distinction between what belongs to organizational versus technological performance appears as a fragile binary nowadays.

THE END OF WORK?

The invention of computers and automation has always triggered utopian visions of liberation through ending the task of work by transferring it to machines. In the 1960s, artworks like «New Babylon» by the Dutch artist and architect Constant (4) symbolized this idea of a work-free future, where life and time correspond to an endless flow of leisure for humans. Shaped by the concept of planetary urbanism by Guy Debord and the French situationists, (5) Constant's imagined city of New Babylon envisions architecture as a technological network that favors the free movement of humans in a workless collective urban environment.

Today, new forms of labor promoted by giant technological companies such as Google, draw on this vision, to both give a rationale to the
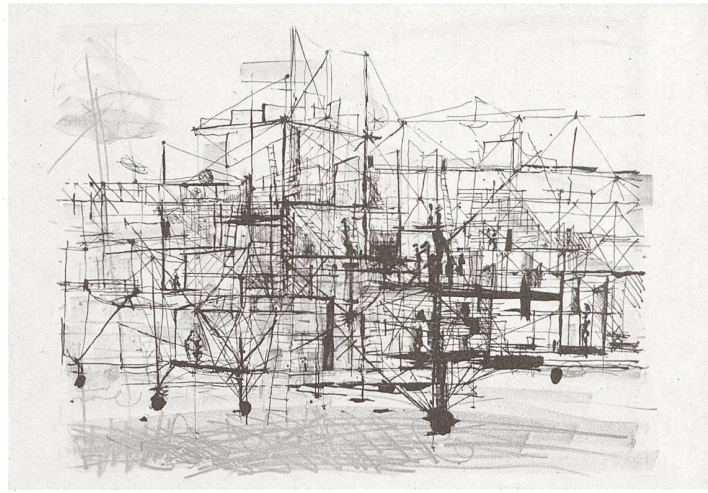
(fig. a) Constant Nieuwenhuys, «New Babylon», 1961, lithograph.
Image: Pictoright

(fig. b) Maxime Delvaux, «Shopping», 2017, photograph.
Image: courtesy of the artist

expansion of algorithms into the very fabric of our society as well as provide an alternative model of work that is becoming the standard of white-collar profession: no specific working hours, gym facilities in the office space, ping-pong tables, casual clothes, work from home, etc. Extending the idea of a «cool job», such forms of labor are blurring the relationship between work and rest, subsequently increasing the performance of workers, who become constantly available through smartphones and the internet.

The protests from employees that helped put in place the 8-hour day during the Industrial Revolution (6) seem now superseded by a voluntary 24-hour connectedness of online availability, email checks and corporate promotion on LinkedIn. Dreams like Constant's of a planetary technological apparatus that liberates mankind in a collective emancipation seem naive nowadays. The erosion of the idea of a post-labor world towards an indistinct relationship to work by means of technology manifests itself through a new political philosophy for 21st century society: Technoliberalism.

TECHNOLIBERALISM AND THE PARADIGM OF «HYPER-PERFORMATIVITY»

Situated in California where the 19th century gold rush took place, Silicon Valley is where technoliberalism takes its inspiration and meaning. Set as both a global economic model and a forefront for a universal liberation of humans by means of computation, the Valley has moved from an experimental industrial area for electronics towards the physical incarnation of the power of companies that have led the development of the internet and its multiple applications.

For Adam Fish who coined the term technoliberalism, (7) its political philosophy embraces «An overriding faith in technology, a suspicion of conventional modernist institutions and a conviction that the aggregate effects of individual engagement of technology will generate social good». (8) Behind a libertarian ethos backed by powerful computational power, lies a more complex reality in what constitutes the major industrial horizon of our time. (9)

Now part of any aspect of our lives, the indisputable presence of algorithms is merging together human labor and the behaviors of technologies. One can simply not exist without the other. In «24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep», (10) Jonathan Crary argues that «There are now very few significant interludes of human existence that have not been penetrated and taken over as work time, consumption time, or marketing time.» (11) Within technoliberalism, organizational and technological performance are intertwined. (12) Their merging allows for an even stronger demand for both humans and machines to perform with efficiency, one that goes beyond their respective capacities. Such is the paradigm that will be called here «hyper-performativity».

Hyper-performativity is the condition of existence for technoliberalism. In this situation, the portrayed autonomy of computation from social organization, as described by most technological companies, appears as a misrepresentation of how our governments, businesses and infrastructures actually work. According to Eric Sadin, «Contemporary computational logic is crossed and intertwined with the proper logic of liberalism.» (13)

To understand the structures of power in the age of algorithms, means looking at performance as a tool that merges human and technological behaviors into a socio-technical apparatus. In order to question the notion of object and subject, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guatarri investigate the option of conceiving of social and technological processes and labor as a continuity in which humans become a component part of the machine, or are combined with something to constitute a machine. (14) The conventional dichotomies of body and mind, or object and subject are surpassed by this extension of the social to the technological.

Hidden in the very infrastructure of cities, companies and states, this entanglement is particularly explicit through the use of smartphones, tablets, computers, iWatch, etc. Within conventional labor space, algorithmic efficiency is applied to organize and rationalize work. Not only limited to service and white-collar workers, hyper-performativity is manifested in an extreme way within the context of the fulfillment center.

THE CASE OF AMAZON WORKERS

Client satisfaction has always been the drive that led Amazon's ideology and success. As mentioned on their website, «Amazon strives to be Earth's most customer-centric company». (15) The number one e-commerce business, seen as one of the most influential economic global forces, has been a pioneer in rationalizing, optimizing and accelerating everything that takes a parcel to its customer. This radical organization decenters any inconvenience from the client to the infrastructure, the workers, the transporters and the technologies. Permitted by a high frequency of new technological patents pushed forward by the company to preserve its technical monopoly, the immense power operated by Amazon implies the performance of a highly efficient network that relies both on humans and machines. Among others, Amazon has secured patents for innovations such as augmented reality goggles, cameras that detect its employees' confusion and drones equipped with face recognition.

As the invisible architectural typology of technoliberalism, the fulfillment center is the place where one can find a specific worker of our contemporary society, the human picker. The word fulfillment is synonymous with achievement, accomplishment, attainment and realization. (16) Outside of its physical envelope, the fulfillment center appears to «fulfill» such a definition, but the opaque façade of its architecture hides a working reality away from Constant's image of the emancipatory potential of technology: infinite rows of goods, off scale factory like spaces, highly repetitive tasks for workers and color-coded elements for efficiency. The simplicity of the client's interface to order goods, further renders invisible the impact of its infrastructure on the environment.

In his book «New Dark Age: Technology and the End of the Future», (17) artist James Bridle describes the logistics technique of Amazon as «chaotic storage», (18) a process in which hand-held devices direct pickers to the items in the fulfillment center where the goods are organized according to an algorithmic logic that does not follow human classification methods such as names, types or dates. For Bridle, «Arranging the world from the

perspective of the machine renders it computationally efficient, but makes it completely incomprehensible to humans». (19)

In addition to creating the conditions of a difficult labor, the hand-held device serves as a tracking system that offers Amazon a tool for optimizing and visualizing the efficiency — or inefficiency — of the trajectories of both machines and employees. The performance of the picker is traced as a digitalized set of spatially situated data that transforms the human into a high performance technology. (20) Just as other parts of an infrastructural equipment, the worker becomes an exhaustible and replaceable item through time. Whether by increasing the working availability outside the boundaries of work, or by augmenting the efficiency of work itself, the universal presence of hyper-performativity is drastically changing our professional lives. Now infamous for its toxic work culture and fast turnover, Amazon has recently been facing the emergence of unions that gradually challenge its overwhelming power over its infrastructure of delivery.

TOWARDS HACKTIVISM

To counteract a growing presence of computation, individuals have shown acts of civil disobedience through technological resistance known as «hacktivism». According to Jon McKenzie, «Hacktivism refers to the emergence of political activism within digital environments, primarily but not exclusively, the internet». (21) Targeted by both democratic and non-democratic states where online surveillance is at play, hacktivism becomes a tool through which agency can be taken over artificial intelligence and the harmful use of personal data. Its rise can be traced back to the democratization of the world wide web in the 1990s with artist collectives such as the Critical Art Ensemble and their book «The Electronic Disturbance». (22) Inside the fulfillment center, protests from Amazon workers can be understood as a form of spatial hacktivism.

Following on Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guatarri, the term could favor a new understanding of our relationship to technological performance, one that accepts its interconnectedness and favors computational technologies for a grassroot resilience instead of a top-down efficiency. For Jon McKenzie, «The challenge lies in forging alliances, not so much against socio-technical machines, but within them». (23) Through turning easy-to-access apparatus such as smartphones, applications, open-source code, sensors and wi-fi availability into desiring-machines, (24) a different understanding of performance emerges to challenge contemporary structures of power and knowledge. With thinkers such as McKenzie Wark who theorizes the hacker as a potential figure for the creation of new free information, (25) or artists like Hito Steyerl who teaches how to hack surveillance systems in her work «How Not to Be Seen», (26) a different discourse is rising on hacktivism, not as a universal solution but as an alternative interpretation to the use of data. For such narratives within the paradigm of hyper-performativity, it is important to understand what role technologies play in the organization of our time as well as the impact of their exponentially growing development on the environment. After all, time is not only money.