

Artwork Response: The Conspiracy Capitaliser by Robert Collins

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The Conspiracy Capitaliser is a timely exploration of the profit-driven mechanics behind digital conspiracy culture, especially as we enter an AI age that will allow false content and claims to be manufactured and amplified with ease. Previously it was assumed - by psychology academics and many others - that conspiracy theories were the preserve of a lunatic fringe. Consequently, it was easy for the mainstream to dismiss conspiracy theorists as people operating on the margins. Against this, sociologists argued that some conspiracy theories were clearly a way for the marginalised to contest power and to express their genuine concerns about the motivations of authorities. For example, African American communities have endorsed medical conspiracy theories, which is usually explained in light of the corrupt and abusive history of medical testing on that community. In this important debate between psychologists and sociologists, there is merit on both sides. But the argument has been superseded entirely by the growth of conspiracy culture on digital platforms. No doubt, some of those drawn into online conspiracy culture could be described as ‘lunatics’ and some have genuine motivations. But the role of money is a key driver and actors in Ireland take their cues from those who make money in the US. They are the role models.

Emerging from Robert Collins’ research into the rise of right-wing social media influencers, Conspiracy Capitaliser captures how conspiracy culture, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, thrived on a network of for-profit actors. Unfortunately, much media coverage focussed on the outrageous claims that surfaced online rather than the dynamics behind them. One consequence of that was that many ordinary - possibly vulnerable - people were stigmatised and ridiculed. Instead, we should focus our attention - and anger - on those who exploit and profit from the fears and anxieties of others. This artwork captures that core point. By simulating the generation of “new controversies,” it underscores the ease of spreading misinformation. In that, it is reminiscent of efforts to ‘pre-bunk’ disinformation through games that let people act as manipulators to understand how easy it is.

As we emerge into the AI dawn, the debates about how to conceptualise conspiracy theories will continue and the debates about how to moderate and regulate digital media will become more acute. Through all of that, we will need artworks like this one that ask to stop and reflect and see a bigger picture.

Artwork Reponse: Boogaloo Bias by [Jennifer Gradecki and Derek Curry](#)
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Have you ever thought about how many times your face is captured on camera, on a daily basis? What happens to your facial image once it is captured? Do you know - is it possible to know?

Your face is constantly under surveillance, and our facial images are being used to train algorithms for facial recognition technology (FRT). The introduction and use of FRT is happening across digital and physical spaces, and Boogaloo Bias showcases some of the crude, dystopic, and nefarious practices of FRT development. Surveillance is not simply police doing stake-outs, or someone looking through their curtains and out the window to monitor their neighbours' comings and goings. Surveillance is the focused, routinised, and systematic attention to detail in order to manage, control, or care for people (Lyon, 2007). Surveillance has existed well before digital technologies, but digital technologies increase the scale and scope of surveillance. This means that the differential impacts of surveillance are also amplified and dispersed unevenly across the population. Boogaloo Bias highlights how FRT coupled with social network analysis (SNA) can lead to certain groups and populations being targeted by policing and security agencies. This is a huge concern!

Surveillance plays a part in almost all aspects of our (digital) lives today. From email to our mobile devices, and our social media profiles on the more personal side of things; over to surveillance in public spaces with CCTV, targeted digital marketing, and various form of mobile surveillance for policing and security with automated license plate recognition (ALPR), body-worn cameras (BWCs), and drones. Since surveillance is so integral to how contemporary society functions and operates, we are often not conscious of how much it permeates our lives. And even when you are conscious of surveillance, how can you challenge or resist it?

In Ireland today, the Public Service Card (PSC) is presented as being mandatory in order to access many government services. This card has your facial image and other biometric measurements on the individual. The card is not mandatory for most, but having one makes it a lot easier to access various social supports. To refuse a PSC is to opt out of some services entirely, and to make your life much more difficult when accessing others. Thus, resisting and challenging the card is only for very privileged individuals. As the Department of Justice and the Gardaí are preparing to take up FRT, it raises concerns about the PSC database being accessed and used as a reference database for FRT. And while the guards might say this will never be the case, function creep is seen across almost all surveillance contexts and technologies. When a technology is introduced for one purpose and reason, the applications and uses of the technology tend to creep into other areas over time.

Artwork Reponse: Forkonomy by Winnie Soon and Lee TzuTung

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One way to look at the wide open ocean is as an outside, and as possibly the last place that has no masters and is independent from society and its rules. This artwork, “Forkonomy”, delightfully invokes the fantasy of freedom, seeking to create a space from where to confront the some-old understanding of (state) sovereignty and its hold over today’s geopolitics.

Also today “the ocean” is one of the principle characters in tense military confrontations. Perhaps the “south china sea” appears as a conflict that is far away, for European audiences, and, to some the ocean might seem less consequential today. After all, some people and some types of goods still appear to come in-and-out, seemingly without friction. What if, however, that has changed and the ocean is showing once again that it will be part of what sets “the island” apart from the mainland?

This is a story of old-fashioned borders and who and what gets in and out. It is, as it was, about intense surveillance of every type of connection, communication, goods, as well as places, like the ones that some people should reach easily, like those with sun or the ones that represent wealth and prosperity. This artwork is a reminder that there is a fork in the road; that there are other paths, leading away from a repeat of that same-old story about a world of empires that compete over power.

Who owns the oceans? Once the answer is what set apart the Spanish, the Portuguese, the Dutch and, yes, the British, when seeking to expand their (colonial) reach. In turn, “Forkonomy” challenges the idea that the ocean belongs to no one, and that the projection of state or corporate power is what decides who owns “the (South China/Irish) Sea”. What if the answer is given that the ocean belongs to “everyone”?

Accordingly the artwork brings together its own set of fantasies about decentralization, participation, community and identity. It ties them together in an “open source” orientation, inspired by its ability to confront and morph the conventional language of contracts, ownership, rights and value. What if an ocean might be that belongs to “the people”, turning it back into a “commons”, or, at least, bringing out that it is multiple, existing as a tangled web of “nature” and “culture” that carries over to (Taiwanese/Irish) identity politics?

And yet, power is elusive, and so is the ocean. There is a sense of lightheartedness to the project that makes it possible to stare into the void of history, which includes strong memories of colonialism and the faint echo of the type of anti-neoliberalism that was once part of open

source philosophies, in the 90s. The latter refers to being curious about code, for its own sake, playfully and enthusiastically experimenting together, exploring the limits of the possible. Also that is about the ocean, as a dream of what might be possible, of human potential released from restriction.

Today, however, the question is unavoidable: what keeps out the more delirious fantasies about the kind of “freedom” that knows no duty to anyone else, in its attempt to create an outside to the hierarchical, centralized and expansive networks? It might be that the ocean “should” belong to everyone, but figuring “how” that might be acted upon implies getting uncomfortably close to the kind of “outside” to society that takes the guise of blockchains, peer-to-peer networks, torrent protocols, onion routing, and other technological attempts to avoid oversight.

There are many answers, and some are from those whose aspiration is that they become one of the powerful themselves; leaving everything else the same. That horizon is one reason why the answer should not just be given in technical terms or by technocrats. It should not even just be about the (lack of) involvement of the struggling (Irish) humanities, arts and social sciences. It should be “you” who now could represent “the island” that is surrounded by “the ocean” and being flooded with the geopolitics of AI, algorithms, code and so on. It needs to be a community effort: to learn “how” to navigate the powerful currents of blockchain, cryptocurrency, AI and so on? How else, after all, will we be able to face the forces unleashed by the many types of geopolitical crises, whether they are infectious, financial, ecological, digital, biotechnological or about fundamental values that require some type of defense?

Artwork Reponse: Cold Call by Tega Brain and Sam Lavigne
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Tega Brain and Sam Lavigne follow in a long line of artists who manipulate and subvert the technological and communication systems and infrastructures of capitalist society. From the détournments of the Situationist International, the computational hacks of the Electronic Disturbance Theatre or the culture jamming techniques of the Yes Men, such practices often employ absurdist and theatrical methods to draw attention to a specific issue or cause.

Cold Call: Time Theft as Avoided Emission addresses the most defining issue of our time - the climate catastrophe. More specifically, it confronts, indeed calls out, one of the principal contributors to this catastrophe, the fossil fuel industry. Influenced by workers' rights movements and strategies for (im!)mobilisation, the piece engages with time as a tactic. In doing so, it can be situated within related practices such as the slow computing, food and travel movements that seek to counterbalance the harm brought about by the relentless global cycle of extraction and consumption.

The ultimate power in this work resides with us, the audience. For without us, there will be no change. By occupying a call centre - a symbol of predatory capitalism - and subverting the communications infrastructure available to us, we challenge the hierarchical status quo of the fossil fuel industry while offsetting, if only temporarily and symbolically, the damage it causes.

Cold Call: Time Theft as Avoided Emission reminds us that both individual and collective direct action are needed to save our planet, and to hold accountable those who knowingly contribute to its destruction in the relentless pursuit of profit.

Artwork Reponse: The Museum of Ethics and Interplanetary Technologies – A Dowsing Poster by Suzanne Treister and Patricia Domínguez

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We live in an age of anxiety over the scale and speed of technological change, the existential risks it presents and the rampant privatisation of its progress and control. A sense of helplessness in shaping our technofutures seems compounded by an uncomfortable relationship with time - our own mortality prevents us from truly testing the apocalyptic predictions of a future that seems always just beyond reach. But what if we could break free of our earthly boundaries and sense our way towards a different relationship to technologies of the future? How might we activate alternative visions of a time which could deliver transformational possibilities of experience?

Using a magic circle, a divination rod and the power of consciousness, this work invites us to ‘dowse’ for alternative technological futures, whether seconds or aeons away. By dangling the USB stick on a string, we position a pendulum over a chart of possibilities, pose a question and enter a portal to a ‘radiesthetic’ system that can lead us to alternative technological imaginaries. By offering cosmic temporal forms to think with (‘galactic years’ and ‘yotta seconds’), we must consider ethical subjects beyond ourselves and reckon with the impact of design after our time and beyond our world. But it is the human and social temporal structures that give us agency - it only takes a ‘jiffy’ or a ‘moment’ to become realigned with the possibilities of a better future.

You may say divination is nothing more than superstition, the random chance of motion, astrology or manifesting to the universe. But is it any better to remain subject to the mercy of the ‘corporate cosmos’? Through dowsing, we connect with an energy trail that begins in the consciousness and moves outwards, towards what we want. This work invites us to shed our cynicism and paralysis over our relationship with technology and to capture the power of sensing and naming what we want, for more ethical and liveable sociotechnical worlds.

Artwork Reponse: Calculating Empires by Kate Crawford and Vladan Joler

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Innovations in the field we broadly know of as Artificial Intelligence seem to have thrust us into a new manifestation of the so-called ‘hype cycle.’ Rather than having technological progress instigate inflated expectations before regularising into a more holistic cost-benefit relationship, we seem instead now to be forever chasing after the next wave of productivity-promising tool, invested as we are in socio-technical imaginaries that tell us that the further development of AI is both inevitable and necessary. This mindset encourages us to focus on what in these developments is novel, that is, the engineered advancements we are encouraged to perceive first as testaments to human ingenuity, and as potential threats to deeply held values only second (if at all). Often, however, the more important questions we need to be asking probe the ways in which these new technologies replicate and extend longstanding consolidations of power.

The wealth and privilege of FAAMG () companies may seem unprecedented, until we think of how feudal lords and indeed the Catholic church similarly exerted influence not only over land and labour, but over the channels by which people came to understand themselves and their world, be that the travelling bard dependent on wealthy patrons or the monks’ scriptorium. From this perspective, we are reminded of all that is familiar in the triple helix of technology, culture and power, rather than being perpetually distracted by that which is new. AI and big data may now seem uniquely deserving of both amazement and concern, but in fact, they represent only the tip of an iceberg of what we in the KT4D (Knowledge Technologies for Democracy) project refer to as knowledge technologies, the history of which leads back as far as the origin human tool-making. This longue durée perspective can offer not only a critical distance, but also a perhaps better measuring stick for determining what among the social ills we are now seeing that have with technology seemingly at their root, are truly new, and what ones we may have seen before in different guises (or indeed have tolerated, just out of our line of sight, for far too long).

Privacy, for example, is a concern that, in its modern legal sense, arose from the rise of a new technology, photography, and the affordances and constraints that this emerging

mechanism to enhance perception and memory brought in the context of journalism. Later, when the telephone proliferated in the form of shared party lines, we once again had to face the trade-offs we were making in terms of ease of communication versus assurance of who was privy to our messages. By harnessing these historical precedents illustrating legal and cultural adaptation, we can perhaps find better ways to navigate the waters of contentious new technologically-enabled concerns, such as the protection of private personal information. Rather than cast them in terms of IT security systems and the market value of our data, we can instead recentre privacy as a mechanism to build and protect social capital and our sense of being connected, but not unduly bound, by the relational aspects of our identities.

Similarly, we can begin to imagine how new visual literacies will emerge in response to deep fake videos, just as early cinema required audiences to adapt. Most importantly, once we understand how every cool new knowledge technology shifts (or consolidates) power, we should have a starting place to be able to imagine new forms of resistance and advocacy on behalf of those unfairly marginalised. As we move away from a stance on the ethics of technological change that assumes any ethical problem arising due to software design can be addressed through the production of yet more lines of code, *Calculating Empires* is the kind of work that should both terrify and empower us. It reminds us that our technological systems are first and foremost representatives of the cultures (national, but also epistemic), interests and values that create them. The idea that we might introduce meaningful friction into these systems, to give the humans a chance to pause and think critically, and to give cultural 'shoulds' a chance to catch up with technological 'cans,' may seem anathema to the our moment of hype. Yet it may be the one thing that allows us to break the cycle of ever faster technological change begetting ever deeper gaps in our ability to know ourselves and see the world in its true complexity.