



Collective Agency in an Era of Authoritarian Automation
Seminar/ Workshop, 2025

Speakers:
Jonathan Beller, Matteo Pasquinelli, Esther Leslie,
Axel Gagne, Blaise Kirschner, and Karin Krifors

Workshop /Symposium

Collective Agency in an Era of Authoritarian Automation

Royal Institute of Art, 26 May 2025

Address: Flaggmansvägen 1

13:30-19:30. Muralen

Life in digital data capitalism seems infinitely manipulable and traceable. New technological systems of identification, communication, and geolocation, automated systems of spatial, temporal and embodied surveillance, and algorithmic channeling of information, all of them operated by a few for-profit monopolistic companies, apparently foreclose the political agency of collectives and individuals. Still, even as the world is shaped by AI, automation, and algorithmic prediction, collective agency persistently asserts itself vis-à-vis authoritarian systems that thrive on data harvesting from the very same physical bodies and digital platforms as people use to manifest their agency. Political action remains viable. Through art practices and theoretical dialogue this seminar explores computational, optic-visual, and aesthetic modellings of the twenty-first-century collective. In what abstract or embodied forms and settings do collective projects and counter currents assert themselves? The workshop explores the ways in which art practices and critical thinking contribute to the illumination of, and resistance against, late-capitalist digital and authoritarian governance.

Speakers

Jonathan Beller, Matteo Pasquinelli, Esther Leslie, Axel Gagge, Blaise Kirschner, and Karin Krifors

Organisers and moderators

Anna Ådahl and Stefan Jonsson

Schedule

13:30

Welcome by **Axel Andersson** head of research at the Royal Institute of Art

Introduction to the research project and symposium by **Anna Ådahl** and **Stefan Jonsson**

13:45

Matteo Pasquinelli, Model Collapse: Information Entropy and the Implosion of Technofeudalism
(short break)

14:45

Esther Leslie, The History and Politics of the 'Device'
(short break)

15:45

Jonathan Beller, Capital is Dead, Long Live Capital?
(short break)

16:45

Coffee Break

17:00

Karin Krifors, Automation of hostile environments: imaginaries of interoperability and knowing migrant populations

17:20

Blaise Kirschner, Topographies of resistance

17:40

Axel Gagge, Socio-physics: modelling and the translations between physics and algorithmic governance

18:00

Panel with all participants and closing remarks

18:45–19:30

Reception

Speakers' Abstracts and Presentations

Matteo Pasquinelli

Model Collapse: Information Entropy and the Implosion of Technofeudalism

Abstract:

US cultural hegemony reaches the historical limits of its sphere of influence with the imposition of Global English as lingua franca, whose peak and downfall, at the same time, is represented today by Large Language Models (LLMs) and their powerful capacity for translation and text generation in all idioms. A mirror of the global economy in stagnation, however, LLMs are struggling to generate meaningful outputs due to the phenomenon of 'model collapse', an inflation and degradation of the training data on which they are based – a scarcity of the living labour that is required constantly to make them look 'intelligent' and more valuable. The collapse of LLMs can be taken as a metaphor of the crisis of knowledge extractivism and the global trade system as a whole (to which the Trump administration is responding with neocolonial tariffs). Economies in decline indeed generate monsters, such as military expansions, authoritarian personalities, and toxic culture. But through the fissures of this collapsing system, alternative futures glimmer.

Matteo Pasquinelli is Associate Professor in Philosophy of Science at Ca' Foscari University in Venice, where he leads the 5-year ERC project *AIMODELS*. His research explores the intersection of philosophy of mind and language, political

economy, and automation technologies such as artificial intelligence. His book *The Eye of the Master: A Social History of Artificial Intelligence* (Verso, 2023), winner of the Deutscher Prize 2024, is being translated into multiple languages. He also edited *Alleys of Your Mind: Augmented Intelligence and Its Traumas* (2015) and co-authored *The Noosphere Manifested* with Vladan Joler (2022). Pasquinelli has published widely in journals including *e-flux*, *Radical Philosophy*, *Theory, Culture & Society*, and *South Atlantic Quarterly*. He previously taught at Pratt Institute and the University of Arts and Design Karlsruhe, where he founded the AI and Media Philosophy research group KIM and coordinates the AI Forensics project.

Jonathan Beller

Capital is Dead, Long Live Capital?

Abstract:

From a prominent quarter of the academic left we hear that “Capital is Dead” (McKenzie Wark), and that “Technofeudalism” (Yanis Varoufakis) and/or “Neofeudalism” (Jodi Dean) has risen from “Capital’s Grave” (Dean) as a kind of “Something Worse” (Wark). The easy part of this paper argues yes, okay, today is worse, at least for the not yet killed, but it’s still capitalism. More difficult yet more promising (for communism) here is the offer of a periodization that takes the mediological and informatic dimensions of contemporary society not as a phenomenological sideshow but as a revolutionizing of productive forces still beholden to the value form and its systems of account. We thus take Dean’s recent *Capital’s Grave: Neofeudalism and the New Class Struggle* as an occasion to wrestle with the situations, dispensations and futures of leftist movements and to propose and refine a set of concepts forged to reveal the persistence as well as the scaling and molecular penetration of the value form. “Computational racial capitalism,” “informatic labor,” “the derivative condition” appear as some of the concepts proffered from the semantic field generated in the calculative pyrotechnics of the dialectic. Some of their implications for struggle will be briefly indicated.

Jonathan Beller is Professor of Humanities and Media Studies and co-founder of the Graduate Program in Media Studies at Pratt Institute. He is also Distinguished Visiting Professor of English and of Women’s, Gender and Sexuality Studies at Barnard College, Columbia University; Visiting Professor at REMESO / Institute for Research on Migration, Ethnicity and Society, Linköping University, Sweden; and Visiting Researcher, University of the Arts, Helsinki Research Institute, Finland. His books include *The Cinematic Mode of Production: Attention Economy and the Society of the Spectacle* (Dartmouth UP, 2006); *Acquiring Eyes: Philippine Visuality, Nationalist Struggle, and the World-Media System* (Ateneo de Manila UP, 2006); *The Message is Murder: Substrates of Computational Capital* (Pluto Press, 2017) and *The World Computer: Derivative Conditions of Racial Capitalism* (Duke UP, 2021). He currently serves as co-editor of *Social Text*.

Esther Leslie

Abstract:

In English, the name for the gadgets through which self and world interact, via algorithms, AI and other aspects of the digital-capitalist economy, is 'devices'. Setting out from the history and present resonances of the device, this talk explores the suffusing of devices in a public space that is increasingly subjected to privatisation. This privatisation, which is a squeeze on its capacity to produce value, more and more appears in the guise of smartness. Charter and freedom cities develop a new distribution of powers in the digital polis, which comes with a hefty dose of authoritarianism alongside its financial neoliberalism. The device is for ever working for this, including in its white balancing and 'helpful' promptings. Can it also work against it? What strategies, politically resistant ones and/or artistic-aesthetic ones, are being deployed or have promising potential in this scenario?

Esther Leslie is Professor of Political Aesthetics at Birkbeck, University of London. Her books include *Liquid Crystals: The Science and Art of a Fluid Form* (2016) and *The Rise and Fall of Imperial Chemical Industries: Synthetics, Sensism and the Environment* (2023) and *Dissonant Waves: Ernst Schoen and Experimental Sound in the Twentieth Century* (with Sam Dolbear, 2023)

Karin Krifors

Automation of hostile environments: imaginaries of interoperability and knowing migrant populations

Abstract:

Numerous algorithmic tools are being implemented by the state to know and govern its migrant population and many advocates of migrant rights experience mobilisation against these, increasingly digital, hostile environments as insurmountable. Interoperability is a focal point in these technological imaginaries of border control, but its implementation relies on a sedimented history of dispossession. The administrative category of a refugee, despite its connotations of protection, is a bureaucratic vulnerability which legitimates the extraction of data and practices of knowing. I draw from my research on European migrant databases and state attempts to predict migrant settlement and ask whether social mobilisation for the impossibility of refugee protection can teach us something about countering authoritarian automation.

Karin Krifors is a researcher at Remeso, Linköping University. Her research interests are social relations of supply chains and logistics, systems of border control and “managed migration”, and countering movements that represent alternative experiences of labour, race, gender and migration.

Blaise Kirschner

Topographies of resistance

Abstract:

I will share reflections on Unica Zürn's illustrated text *The House of Illnesses* (1958), in which Zürn conceives of her body and her institutionalisation as one formation, alongside my current research on *Stratopeda Gynaikon* (Women's Camps, 1976), a collective account of political imprisonment on the island of Trikeri, secretly written by

a group of exiles in the wake of the Greek Civil War. Reading both texts with attention to how resistance to pathologisation and political re-education are figured in relation to architectures and landscape as violent continuations of individual and collective bodies, I speculate on how such figurations can inform a present imaginary and praxis of collective agency in the face of technologically and algorithmically enhanced authoritarianisms.

Blaise Kirschner (they/them) is an artist who primarily works in the moving image. Their films and installations have been widely screened and exhibited internationally. Kirschner recently completed a PhD (“Anamersion: Toward a postcinematic poetics of immersion”) at The Royal College of Art, London, and currently is a Professor in Fine Art with Focus on Moving Image at The Royal Institute of Art, Stockholm.

Axel Gagge

Socio-physics: modeling and the translations between physics and algorithmic governance

Abstract:

Modelling – the creation of mathematical models for analysis and prediction – is not a neutral pursuit but a craft demanding trained judgement, political choices and aesthetic knowledge. From its roots in controlling the physics of molecular masses through their averages, modelling was generalized into a method of governance. Building on my experience and tacit knowledge of modelling, I discuss how worldviews and practices have been translated from physics to algorithmic governance through the example of socio-physics. I consider noise, deviation and opacity as sites of scientific, aesthetic and political potential of algorithms.

Axel Gagge is an artist, writer, researcher, and critical engineer, working with physics and computation. He holds a PhD in quantum mechanics and is a student of the MFA program at the Royal Academy of Art (RAA) in Stockholm.

Organizers (Anna Ådahl and Stefan Jonsson)

Collective Agency in an Era of Authoritarian Automation is a fine arts practice-based research project funded by Vetenskapsrådet (The Swedish Research Council) constituted and conducted by professor and writer Stefan Jonsson and postdoc researcher and visual artist Anna Ådahl. Through multiple mediums and art practices, we investigate how human bodies are translated into data through multiple harvesting and image-based scanning processes, and we explore how collective behavior and agency is shaped by computational technologies which align the 21st-century crowd with political programs and market strategies that defy democratic values. Deploying conceptions of porosity, transmediation and figuration, *Collective Agency* portrays embodied forms of subjective agency and collective assembly that interrupt processes of collective automation. Speculating over future scenarios – including the deployment of digital tools and quantum computing – we seek to make abstract processes concrete. At the heart of our endeavor is an ominous riddle: Will democracy survive the 21st century?

Anna Ådahl is a visual artist and postdoctoral researcher at the Institute for Research on Migration, Ethnicity and Society (REMESO), Linköping University, affiliated with the Royal Institute of Art. Working across mediums such as film, installation, and performance, her practice employs the editing tools of assemblage and montage—where found footage meets newly produced images, and incorporating ready-mades as props within spatial narratives. The body frequently appears as a reference and investigative tool in her work. Her practice-based PhD, *Inside the Postdigital Crowds* (Royal College of Art, London, 2022), explored the aesthetics and politics of digital conditions in which contemporary crowds are governed and shaped.

Stefan Jonsson Stefan Jonsson is professor at the Institute for Research on Migration, Ethnicity and Society (REMESO), Linköping University, and a writer and critic. In addition to numerous other books, he has published *Eurafrica* (with Peo Hansen 2013), *Subject Without Nation* (2000), *A Brief History of the Masses* (2008), and *Crowds and Democracy* (2013).

The symposium is sponsored by the Institute for Research on Migration, Ethnicity and Society, Linköping University, the Royal Institute of Art, and the Swedish Research Council (Vetenskapsrådet).