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COUNTER-FUTURING THE INTERNET.

A CONVERSATION

ÖZGÜN EYLÜL İŞÇEN AND SHINTARO MIYAZAKI

INTRODUCTION

The following dialogue builds upon our ongoing collaboration for the Counter-N, a web-based publishing, exchange, and research collection.¹ We mobilized this site to envision, encounter, and enact alternative modes of computing – informing, scaling, modeling, mapping, speculating, rhythming, networking, communalizing, and more To be able to envision the future of contemporary media technologies, or the internet in the case of this text, we underscore the importance, if not the necessity, of investing in forms and networks of praxis that invert the contemporary enframing of technological systems and their underlying colonial, racial, and patriarchal epistemologies.

For Counter-N, we interview a wide variety of scholars, artists, and other practitioners, whose trajectories reveal similar concerns and interventions. Here, N is meant as an open variable to be occupied. Counter-N is thus a sort of constructive critique, which not only dissects, analyzes, debunks, and decomposes the subjects it opposes, but also puts things together. This is why N stands for a verb form(-ing), highlighting both its active and processual nature. Building upon the accumulation of know-how and socio-technical imaginaries, we present a reflective dialogue that tackles the question of how the future(s) of the internet will unfold and what it (they) will look like:

Shintaro Miyazaki (SM): The assumption that there are always many futures of the internet already opens up many aspects to talk about, in my opinion: There might be a future where things won't drift away from current developments – the future of the internet as seen by a capitalist realist, for example. Different perspectives might demand a radical change, but cannot articulate how this alternative network might operate. Others would probably know exactly how and why we need a different internet than the one we have now. Some scholars and activists might even remind us that maybe we don't actually know what *the* internet is even now. So Eylül, what is your conception of a future internet?

Özgün Eylül İscen (ÖEI): My conception of a future(s of the) internet builds upon my interpretation of computational media, which takes a wide-angled approach to its complicated history and future trajectory. Since the 2008–09 global financial crisis, the neoliberal ethos has come forth via the technocratic premises of finding market-led and technology-enabled solutions to the ever-growing economic and

¹ Please see: <https://counter-n.net>.

ecological crises. The main goal of this currently dominant technological rationality is to valorize everything that feeds the accumulation of capital, that is to say, to subject all other spheres of society and life itself to its extractive logic. The future internet is no exception, as designated in the spectacles of platforms like Metaverse that have already promoted a vision of the internet as a single immersive world.

Despite such totalizing tendencies, I insist that a total capture of computational capital, referencing Jonathan Beller's emphasis on the historical entanglements of computation and capitalism as an imperial enterprise (2018), is never possible. In other words, their extractions rely on colonial histories and imperial logics that can only operate through frictions.² Hence, I imagine the future internet as a realm of struggles: I pay particular attention to ongoing decolonial, anti-racist, feminist, queer, labor, and migrant movements that intervene in the material and symbolic infrastructures underlying the operations of the internet as much as our conceptions of its future.

SM: What do you mean more concretely?

ÖE: As a scholar focusing on the Middle Eastern context, I could give the example of Arab uprisings since the early 2010s, popularized as Facebook/Twitter revolutions, affirming the catalytic role of the internet. However, some scholars such as Miriyam Aouragh and Paula Chakravartty (2016, 2) encourage us to attend to the colonial histories and neoliberal agendas that had shaped the implications of such social movements. Indeed, we witnessed how local ruling elites and foreign imperial powers suppressed the upheavals while utilizing technical interventions, including internet cuts and social media monitoring, even sometimes in collaboration with these platforms. Thus, I am interested in neither naive optimism nor indifferent pessimism. It is not a matter of bad or good uses, as we can count many examples of both.

Instead, following Ariella Aïsha Azoulay's work on photography (2015), I explore the political ontology of the given medium – networked media – to acknowledge its programmed nature and its radical potential for exceeding that very nature. Here, “nature” refers to the thick layers of history and structures that operationalize the internet within the contemporary paradigm of platform capitalism, in the sense of being conditioned or dominated by it. Despite its political ontological as such, photography (or the computer) has also engendered a political space for encounter and visibility, as people take, look at, and distribute visual media and reimagine their everyday life through these practices. In this sense, Azoulay offers a theory of apparatus that leaves room for openness, which de-

2 My use of the term “friction” here is a reference to Anna Tsing's work on friction (2004) and what she describes as “supply chain capitalism” (2009). Nonetheless, my point also engages with a broader repertoire of critical work within postcolonial studies and on logistical capitalism.

rives from its sociality despite its programmatic nature (as Vilém Flusser would say).

Yet, this openness does not indicate an unbounded realm but an ongoing struggle. In *The Stack*, for example, Benjamin Bratton (2015) highlights the accidental nature of computational media, which operates at a planetary scale via thick layers of hardware and software, or locally and globally, in a constant process of encounter and negotiation. However, I am more aligned with Tiziana Teranova's take on this in *Red Stack* (2014), which reconfigures it as a collective effort at mobilization for alternative, perhaps even revolutionary ends, within the realm of post-internet aesthetics and the neoliberal turn it is embedded in.

From this angle, I would like to ask how you see it, given the complicated and often conflicting paths prescribed for the internet, and especially alongside your work on alternative modes of commoning in the post-internet era, spanning the last few decades.

SM: Yes, how do I see it? It refers to the oscillatory spectrum of the frame that *the* internet and our imagination is operating within, I guess. I like how you emphasize that, although the future internet is obscure and really hard to imagine without capitalism, there might a sort of inherent potential residing in computational technology, simply because it is not one thing, but an entanglement of a manifold of entities and agencies including humans (poor and rich), animals, machines, networks, soils, geographies. So the frame – to stay in the same metaphor – turns out to be porous, since what the internet will become depends on how it is instrumentalized or whether it becomes a tool at all. Here two aspects come into play. Firstly, and to continue the earlier thought, as soon as a medium gets more complicated, it begins to develop a sort of stubbornness, a resistance, an agency, which goes beyond what is calculable, programmable and therefore intentionally controllable. This sort of unintended unfolding becomes mostly visible in negative ways, when networks break down because of some unintended programming error (see Miyazaki 2016).

Another example of a more or less surprising development is our positive remembrance of the early phase of the internet, where it fostered collaboration and the spread of free and open-source software production. Such developments were certainly not intended by economists and profit-driven planners, who were more interested in transforming the internet into a market, where nothing is for free. In the first decade of the 21st century it seemed that we had entered a new era, in which stored music, for example, was changing from a commodity into a commons, shared and copied without any form of commodification. But these openings and the alternative forms of productivity they implied created new ways to capture and enclose them. With digital copyright management, music soon turned into a commodity and property once again.

Secondly, speaking of commoning, which is the activity of maintaining, organizing, creating and consuming commons, I believe it is important to think about aspects of it and the processes and resources it involves. These remain ungraspa-

ble, slippery, and ever-changing. I would like to describe this attitude and the very difficult practice of commoning in terms of what Fred Moten and Stefano Harney call the undercommons. So undercommoning, if you will, is “a social poetics: a constant process where people make things and make one another or, to be more precise, where inseparable differences are continually made” (Moten 2016, 24). You cannot isolate the undercommons, nor can you capture or divide it. How beautiful is that!

The question then would be: How can we *do* the future of internet in such a way? We mean our bodies, but also pieces of hardware and software that we have appropriated and made useful (to some degree). This then involves different ways of programming and performing operations. So we would need to play with alternative protocols, as has been done recently with ActivityPub, an open, decentralized social networking protocol used to form so-called federated networks. So this is a beginning, but how could we then make ActivityPub an undercommons, i.e. a commons that is openly secured?

ÖE: Can you expand more on your idea of counter-algorithmicity, especially through its relevance for the future of the commons? I think this could offer further context for Counter-N, too.

SM: Counter-algorithmicity is an alternative condition or state of algorithmicity, so it is a concept for thinking about future internets. Algorithmicity is the currently most visible state of algorithm-driven technologies, networks, and systems, which frame and condition our everyday lives in the age of technocapitalisms. The term addresses the entanglements of technology with capital, focusing on its rhythms, timings, and protocols. It is also, as you might have already guessed, a sort of ironic misspelling, a so-called cacography, of *algorithm* and *rhythm*. But the point back then, when I proposed it, was to look and listen more closely to the rhythms of algorithms and their productivity. Counter-algorithmicity proposes that there must be different, alternative modes of rhythmicity, unfolding, and dancing which operate not within the dictates of capital, the market, competition, and profit orientation but in a sort of commons-oriented, solidarity-based way. This means first of all that it is based on needs, not market-driven dynamics, but then of course the question is: How do we negotiate and organize our needs with media that store, transmit and process them? What do we need to consider to exercise counter-algorithmicity?

ÖE: It's great that you've brought up Harney and Moten's idea of undercommons. For me, it is also related to countervisuality in Mirzoeff's sense (2011). Let me expand it further. In the same book, Harney and Moten rework *logisticality* in opposition to the racism and coloniality inherent in capitalism, moving from its historical manifestations such as the Atlantic Slave Trade to its present (2013, 92). In response, they argue for building a social capacity to “take apart, dismantle, tear down the structure that, right now, limits our ability to find each other, to see beyond it and to access the places we know lie beyond its walls” (6).

This is how I interpret Mirzoeff's countervisuality, which aims at inverting the imperial regime of visuality underlying capitalist operations (2011, 22). In other words, countervisuality is never merely about seeing but rather about claiming what Mirzoeff terms "the right to look" and restoring one's relationship to material reality and history. As Mirzoeff conceives it, the opposite of the right to look is not censorship, but visuality – a set of techniques for classifying, segregating, and aestheticizing used to represent the world in a way that legitimizes the authority of established power. Hence, the development of techniques of visuality has been entangled with the modern idea of Man's superiority and has rendered all other categories, such as the colonized, invisible (Mirzoeff, 2014). Countervisuality resists that.

SM: So, let's talk a bit more about future and futuring. How is counter-futuring related to countervisuality?

ÖE: Today there is a political imperative to extend *smartness* to all areas of life via ubiquitous computing, characterizing what Orit Halpern and Robert Mitchell call the "smartness mandate" in their recent book (2022) – ultimately a new mode of managing politics, economics, and the environment. Under this imperative, counter-visibility extends beyond the visual field and unsettles the spatial and temporal regimes underlying the convergence of extraction, finance, and logistics intensified via computational systems. Indeed, it puts an emphasis on the politics of futurity, as it not only manifests in the calculated futures of predicting machines but also imposes specific profit-driven imaginaries of preemptive risk and hope for the future.

In contrast, I am working on *counter futuring* by engaging with some pioneering work while learning from and with ongoing social, labor, and environmental movements across the Global North/South divide. The term counter-futuring has evolved in our conversation with Jussi Parikka (2022), building upon his work on the "counterfuturisms" (2017) arising within visual arts in the Middle East and additionally putting an emphasis on its verb form in the present tense. One of the pioneer texts we referenced in this conversation was Kodwo Eshun's 2003 text on Afrofuturism, in which he identifies "counterfutures" in terms of reclaiming the right to reliable futures in contrast to the futures prescribed by profit and power. For Eshun, counterfutures do not refer to some utopian or dystopian projections but instead embrace the act of reprogramming the present, "engineering feedback between its preferred future and becoming present" (ibid., 290).

So, we can say the same for envisioning the future of the internet, too. Indeed, my recent interest in the growing global trend of smart urbanism speaks to the future of the internet, and the Internet of Things in its expanded sense, as they are increasingly part of everyday and city life via ubiquitous computing. Nonetheless, the entangled politics of technology and future is hard to navigate today. On the one hand, there are profit-driven, high-tech spectacles of so-called ethnofuturisms such as Sinofuturism or Gulf Futurism, which drastically diverge from the emancipatory agenda of futurisms such as Afrofuturism. On the other

hand, media theorists and activists who offer necessary critiques of the totalizing forces of techno-capitalism often end up with a pessimistic image of the future.

The stakes are so high, however, that we cannot afford to get caught up in visions of canceled or dark futures. For me, it requires some privilege to do so since for many dispossessed communities, the apocalyptic future has already arrived, and they are still in the streets fighting for their rights and dignity. With these concerns in mind, I reach out to other scholars and practitioners who address this very dialectic of computation, capital, and history, and urge them to enact and envision alternative possibilities for computational practices as well as world- and future-making. In Jussi Parikka's terms, we need to "seize the means of futuring" (2022, 5).

In this respect, I see my work as resonating with Aimee Bahng's work on "migrant futures" (2017), which highlights how displaced and disavowed populations navigate and contest the hegemonic speculations of (finance) capitalism. She pays attention to its messy sites, the sites of "frictions" in Tsing's terms, exposing the contingencies and contradictions of the world of logistics, such as borders – though this could also be extended to logistical cities, as I do in my work on Gulf Futurism.³ For instance, Dubai's achievement as a regional power within the global network of logistics is built on the coupling of smart technology with a repressive labor regime, which relies on the systematic exploitation of non-citizen labor via the Kafala (sponsorship) system (Ziadah 2018, 193–195).⁴ In response, we have witnessed the organized efforts of migrant workers and their allies across borders to abolish the Kafala.

Expanding upon *AbdouMaliq Simone's work* (2016), I argue that such efforts among these marginalized communities promote not only compensation for the inadequacies of social protection but the production of new political subjectivities and cities yet to come. Given the entanglements of computational capital and the politics of futurity (in the form of financial speculations, predictive algorithms, or apocalyptic narratives), the realm of speculation has yet become an expanded site of struggle. Thus, this reclaiming, or reprogramming in Eshun's terms, can only be widened and sustained with bottom-up, organized, and transnational mobilizations, where world-making becomes future-making and vice versa; and in the present tense with its thick history as well as its radical potential.

3 Fatima Al Qadiri and Sophia Al-Maria coined the term *Gulf Futurism* to highlight the socio-cultural contradictions inherent in the accelerated urban and technological development in the Arabian Gulf. Please see: Dazed Digital. "Al Qadiri and Al-Maria on Gulf Futurism." 14 November 2012. <https://www.dazeddigital.com/music/article/15037/1/al-qadiri-al-maria-on-gulf-futurism> [accessed 3 August 2023]

4 The Kafala system is in force in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, and also in Lebanon and Jordan. In the Kafala, the legal status and well-being of non-citizen workers are dependent on a local sponsor/employer. Even though there are variations across these countries, non-citizen workers are most often deprived of basic civil and labor rights, constituting a labor force stratified by class, race, gender, ethnicity, and citizenship.

My gesture here is not to romanticize any resilient strategy or social group but to attend to the messy sites of the seemingly intangible conception of the internet (e.g., cloud computing), where urban information is made, commodified, accessed, and politicized in multiple and mostly conflicting ways (Mattern 2021). In this respect, reflecting on the different generations of internet activism and its subcultures since the 1990s (net art, hackerspaces, etc.), and perhaps even earlier, could help us to trace the continuum across the past and future, as well as online and offline realms. How do you see that kind of archive, bridging the past futures and speculative nows of the internet, thereby transmitting know-how, as well as hopes and frustrations, across generations? There is also a new trend of digging into that kind of heritage or legacy and resituating it on the part of historically marginalized social groups rather than mostly white-male-dominated circles. For instance: Mindy Seu's *Cyberfeminism Index* (2022)⁵ and Legacy Russell's *Glitch Feminism* (2020).

SM: I think we should follow Wendy H.K. Chun's take on the early cyberspace and what she calls "hopeful ignorance" (2021, 34). I paraphrase this as the naivety of settler liberalism, meaning that only a few privileged individuals experienced some sort of *freedom* in the 1990s, and differences in race, gender, education, access to technology, etc. were thought to be a thing of the past. Net art at the time was certainly interesting, since it played with the mediality and the technological agency of the www and its failures. Communities evolved to share expertise and experience, and soon this merged with older networks of sharing and peer production, leading to free software cultures. This peaked around the early 2000s, so before the current phase, which started around 2010. We saw some quite interesting developments and movements, such as the creative commons or the Wi-Fi commons. There was a lot of open sharing before those who spoke of piracy started to gain control and successfully enclose and capture all our online activities. In light of this, the archive of the www and other forms of networked activism is crucial. We should cease to write histories of the winners and the powerful and instead write more about these forgotten, lost, and sunken ideas, projects, and communities. In Nick Dyer-Witford's classic, *Cyber Marx*, there are many sites of struggles, but networks are also mentioned, such as those from the 1992 Los Angeles riots, the anti-globalization movement, or the Zapatistas, etc. We could also look into the early networks of cyber feminism, as you suggested: The Old Boys Network around Cornelia Sollfrank would be a starting point, for example. The future of the internet lies in its forgotten and unrealized pasts.

ÖE: Your referencing Dyer-Witford also reminds me of his most recent work with different generations of scholarship and activism on the current mass uprisings since 2018 – ranging from the United States and Lebanon to Chile and Hong Kong. They identify "riot platforms" in opposition to police/policing platforms and

5 Before concretizing this in the printed book, Mindy Seu launched it as an online database: <https://cyberfeminismindex.com>.

counter-riot platforms, such as the online mobilizations of far-right groups. Despite the repressive gestures of the latter, riot platforms produce dynamic infrastructures and tactics, whether physical, technical, or symbolic. Thus, their wide-ranging analysis of riot platforms shows how these struggles are ongoing, dialectical processes that consist of contradictory forces and shifting strategies confronting one another. Given our current theme, it is possible to say that the future of the internet is already taking shape in the streets.

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