

Emporium of Benevolent Data

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Emporium of Benevolent Data is an exhibition project by Adrien Guillet and Quentin Lannes, in collaboration with Corner College, based on the two artists' long-term friendship and discussions. It puts on display their recent works *Citracit*, a site-specific research-based installation by Adrien Guillet, and the two video installations *#IamRebekah* and *The Next Round* by Quentin Lannes.

The title of the exhibition project is inspired by the story "The Analytical Language of John Wilkins."¹ The latter is a scientist from 17th century enlightenment whose "ambiguities, redundancies and deficiencies remind us of those which doctor Franz Kuhn attributes to a certain Chinese encyclopaedia entitled 'Celestial Empire of benevolent Knowledge'"² with its taxonomy of animals. The exhibition especially considers the distinctive character, listed in this encyclopaedia under the letter "(f)", of being "fabulous," as a method of fabulation on historical materials, modern ruins, commodities, and the recent rapid move of virtual-reality technologies into the medium mainstream, revealing a new geopolitics of the virtual and a crisis of representation of the body that inevitably follows from it. The dialogical format of the exhibition invokes a benevolent methodology that breaks with genealogy and linear narrative, détourning 'cognitive technologies' to actively speculate and generate deviated narratives that remain open in their "inherent formlessness," providing the viewer with a "groundless basis of the aesthetic experience."³ This methodology is both anachronistic and futurist, which inevitably come together in a live structure, in what Shklovsky describes as a "ludic ruin/ construction site that lays a foundation for the subversive practice of estrangement."⁴ The connecting principle of the works on display is the interplay of de-coding and encoding of the technological dispositifs, colonial history, and material knowledge. As their collective motto, the artists refer to what the Red Queen says to Alice about remembering events before they happen as well as events that have happened: "It's a poor sort of memory that only works backwards."⁵

The *Celestial Emporium of Benevolent Knowledge*, to which *Emporium of Benevolent Data* refers, was an important inspiration for Michel Foucault

1 Jorge Luis Borges, "The Analytical Language of John Wilkins," trans. Ruth L. C. Simms, in *Other inquisitions 1937-1952* (Austin/TX: University of Texas Press, 1993).

2 *Ibid.*

3 Roger M. Buerger, Ruth Noack, *Documenta Kassel 16.06.-23.09.2007* (Taschen, 2007), Introduction.

4 Svetlana Boym, "Tatlin, or, Ruinophilia," in *Cabinet*, Issue 28 (*Bones*), Winter 2007/08, <<http://www.cabinetmagazine.org/issues/28/boym2.php>> (accessed 2016-07-03).

5 Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*.

when writing *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, for his fabulation on epistemological models out of “the laughter that shattered” and its echo “continuing long afterwards to disturb and threaten with collapse our age-old distinction between the Same and the Other.” This echo shall be heard from the depth of the exhibition, rather than forms of mediation of the ambivalent. For Foucault and other post-structuralists, in Borges’ story, “Chinese” thinking shows signs of typical schizophrenic thought processes. The latter can be connected to another passage in Lewis Carroll’s *Alice*, her encounter with the Cheshire cat:

“But I don’t want to go among mad people,” Alice remarked.

“Oh, you can’t help that,” said the Cat: “we’re all mad here. I’m mad. You’re mad.”

“How do you know I’m mad?” said Alice.

“You must be,” said the Cat, “or you wouldn’t have come here.”⁶

The Cheshire Cat’s grin is the entrance to the virtual, to the multiplicity of the virtual event without actualization, to that schizophrenic thought that is the thought of resistance even to the non-linear structure of semiotic and machinic capitalism. Mad thought is so unpredictable that there are always ruptures and unexpected inventions, borne by a memory that works both forwards and backwards and forms its own micro-system.

What intersects in the works of Adrien Guillet and Quentin Lannes is how they investigate the function of signs and their material-immaterial implications throughout commodity culture and cognitive economy, speculating about the narratives of the near past and the near future, respectively, critically reflecting how the ideological apparatuses and the technological dispositif of modern society affect the post-human conditions of our contemporary situation. They anticipate the future and analyze the past as creative actions, fabulating with a science fiction precision employing controversies (or dialectics) that come from data, in which the notion of discourse and difference have appeared, with the benevolent data that deteriorates the diagram of cognitive capitalism based on rationalization and automation.

“It is obvious that the new Citroën has fallen from the sky,” wrote Roland Barthes in his essay on “The New Citroën,” in his *Mythologies* series analyzing and examining the social system and its creation of modern myths.⁷ The new Citroën DS combines futuristic body design and innovative technology, reaching mass production after 18 years of secret development. No longer does the automobile express mere speed, but “speed with natural grace.” If it is obvious why the population “appropriates them as a purely magical object,” and Barthes emphasizes “an absence of origin” of the new Citroën, its genealogy can actually be traced to the company built by André Citroën at the beginning of the century, which became popular with its half-track cars with military and exploratory function in colonial history, field tested in Citroën’s great expeditions crossing the Sahara as well as to the polar circles and across other undeveloped parts of Asia, America and Africa, offering a step into new adventures and a 360 degree panoramic view of exotic landscapes from the carrier under the open sky, to rather well-to-do tourists.

The rapid development of the automobile during the 1920s and the building of new roads based on military and colonial interests, and in consequence the emergence of mass tourism, induced the acceleration and mediatization of all aspects of daily life in a mechanized society and commodity culture that evolved into a new mode of producing goods and services: the branding of life. If the new car’s “surface and shape defy the sense of touch,” new technologies are soft and demand the sense of touch. Indeed, consumers are hypersensitive in the neutral use of

6 *Ibid.*, Chapter 6.

7 In Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (1957).

their hands and eyes. One could add, regarding recent mythologies: "It is obvious that the new smart phone has fallen from the sky, too."

Myth is natural. Archeology is a method of denaturalization of the past and future and presupposes the collapse or failure of the myth in itself. It is concerned with excavating the foundations of modern ruins and creating alternate epistemologies. In the virtual of these modern ruins, the cognitive economy attempts to replace the assembly lines for cars and other goods by the future of a molecular-nanotechnological society based on new production processes like 3D printing, tending to merge reality and virtuality. With the optical illusions and magical traces of these technologies, there is no longer "a clear distinction between deceptive reality and some firm positive kernel of the Real."⁸

Emporium means also a big market of everything. The merchant culture has been replaced by the mall, and today's great emporium consists of companies like Amazon or eBay, to which one could add Google with its new phenomenon of a global emporium of data. This kind of (big) data is not only a matter of the past but also of the future, of the predictability of consumer behavior. The accumulation of data and its appropriation for profit creates a new magnitude of surplus value, through "the sale of data produced by the activity of the users or consumers." It provides maximum surplus value from unemployed labor or so-called "free labor," as social products like knowledge produced by users and the collective intelligence are incorporated in the gigantic reproduction of capital, extending productivity to all spheres of life. These companies introduce protocological control and flexibilization, invisible algorithms and data centers through which they are keeping their options open to monopolize collections of data. As Matteo Pasquinelli writes, "Google's power is not given as a metaphysical being but it is originated from its technological platform and business model."⁹ At the same time, artificial intelligence is one of the major future trends in data mining, not only in the sense of how predictions can be made about what we will want and what will be, but in the future, cloud applications will be able to replicate a person's brain downloaded onto a computer. Google experts claim that with advances in these replication technologies, we will be uploading our entire minds to computers by 2045, and our body will be replaced by machines within 90 years.

Through the somatization and medialization of the cognitive economy, modern mythologies have evolved into a post-Fordist mythocracy, which has produced apparatuses that not only process signs, but entirely new apparatuses for capturing the potentiality of life (in the spheres of the bios) and exercising control over it, and quantifying the potentiality of the living body. It marks a shift from industrial manufacturing processes to cognitive capitalism or biocapitalism and "the new organic composition of the capital."¹⁰

Besides cars, the boxing sport has its own place in modern mythologies of industrial urbanity and turned into a grammar of aesthetic interventions in contemporary art. With an art and culture of its own, it represents the clash between industrial urbanity and working man, as an agonistic place of struggles involving issues of class, race, sexuality and gender. It has attracted a great number of artists, from Andy Warhol and Jean-Michel Basquiat's posing for a glamorous fake boxing photo shoot to Joseph Beuys with his 1972 *Boxing Match for Direct Democracy* with Abraham David Christian at Documenta 5. With parodic heroic gestures and exaggerated masculinity, Shinohara Ushio developed Action Cartooning, an expression of Neo Dadaism, as a critique of colonial and hegemonic

8 Slavoj Žižek, "Welcome To The Desert Of The Real – 10/7/01 – Reflections on WTC - third version," <<http://lacan.com/reflections>> (accessed 2016-07-03).

9 Matteo Pasquinelli, "Google's PageRank Algorithm: A Diagram of the Cognitive Capitalism and the Rentier of the Common Intellect," *pankov*, 16 March 2010 <<https://pankov.wordpress.com/2010/03/16/google%e2%80%99s-pagerank-algorithm-a-diagram-of-the-cognitive-capitalism-and-the-rentier-of-the-common-intellect/>> (accessed 2016-07-03).

10 Christian Marazzi, *The Violence of Financial Capitalism* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2011), p. 115.

western and North American culture. He called his own boxing techniques that produced his paintings, "Imitation Art," as he copied the gestures of the actionist painter artists and retranslated them in a narcissistic fight with the canvas in which punches take the place of the strokes of the brush. The creative industry and its spectacle have capitalized on the boxing sport, turning it into a billion dollar industry with stars produced by the mass media, into an urban spectacle of the modern industrial city attracting record crowds in their pursuit of leisure at the beginning of the 1920s. Indeed, "behind the entertaining spectacle of the sport, lies the political side of boxing,"¹¹ which raises questions of class, race, gender, of who boxes, who manages the bodies, how they are commercially exploited, who watches, and how.

In the current VR tech invitation to the spectators to look at the scenery of a virtual reality and its amazing panoramic visuals, let us not forget French philosopher Jean Baudrillard, who with his "Welcome to the desert of real" stated that the true reality was destroyed by a simulation. The new frontier of colonizing is "the desert of the real," i.e., our perceptions, cognitions, affects, emotions, our cooperations and ability of communication and interhuman relations. "Simulation is no longer a territory, a referential being, or a substance." It is a map of unthinkable complexity of the third order simulacrum, where the target of the new colonialism is the relationship between thinking and feeling, rather unconscious and intuitive forms of perception co-opted by a process of rationalization applied through emotions, bodily functions, and the peripheral nervous system. Virtual technologies offer a step into unexpected adventures in an artificial reality, whose main value is to be as much realistic as natural, providing an immersive and active VR experience, and renew the idea of the exotic voyage, this time with personalized safe 360-degrees panoramic views towards new generated 'worlds' of endless multiplicity. As we can see in advertising of VR technologies, these "applications of locomotion in virtual reality stretch far beyond gaming: training and simulation, fitness, virtual tourism, virtual trade-shows and events, meet-ups and multi-person adventures, virtual workplaces, museums, VR architecture, VR concerts." The list can be prolonged.

The romantic image of the super human and cyborg are interwoven in the fashion model of *#IamRebekah* and the boxing hero, central to the boxing culture of *The Next Round* by Quentin Lannes, where the artist explores how technology reinforces prevailing ideologies, and exposes to the viewer the mechanisms and technological premises of their dispositif in contemporary society. The artist explores the new frontier of these new tech phenomena and the cognitive flexibility that explodes the plasticity of the brain, how the brain treats the artificial robotic limbs and projects the self-body into the avatar's body as a real body in the Virtual Reality Training simulators. Prosthesis patients "experience [an artificial limb] as if it were real."

The protagonist of the Quentin Lannes' video and sound installation, *The Next Round* (2016) is a boxer who fights invisible avatars, fighters without substance and any resemblance to anything in the real world. The athlete's performance of ideal duelers who stand toe to toe on the boxing ring and punch each other is transformed into a singularized presence that has to be applied to the other invisible boxer distant kilometers from the ring. The main qualities of the box game, spectatorship, suffering and redemption, not only confront the reality of the virtual, but regulate our relation to the real. The *entertainment* industry of virtual boxing (VR Boxing) has transformed the game of boxing into a "high stakes game of perception." The enclosure of the boxing ring, or 'square circle,' by ropes that can be seen as virtual trajectories or the invisible strings of a coordinate system, is perfectly scaled for the virtual reality and can be symbolically connected to the flexible support ring R & D or other virtual reality motion platforms. However, generally a ring represents the virtual

11 Ms Natasha, "The Culture and Power of Boxing," *inksight*, 12 September 2015 <<http://inksight.iact.edu.my/the-culture-and-power-of-boxing/>> (accessed 2016-07-04).

reality in a sacred geometry or in the form of uroburos worm, a space of simulacrum, potentiality, imaginary and infinite multiplicity.

"When people think of virtual reality, more often than not, it is equated to a video game, but it really is about capturing very intense, realistic moments. As far as anyone is concerned – according to Bailenson – virtual reality should be perceptually equivalent to an actual experience." (<http://sportsworld.nbcsports.com/virtual-reality-sports-arkansas-kentucky/>)

The artist further critically reflects on the new technology of VR immersions like Oculus Rift helmets and HTC Vive, movement (Omni movement platform) and touch (vibrating Teslasuit) to confront and anticipate the impact of these technologies in the future. "Things that would only have lived in someone's imagination 20-25 years ago are now becoming realities." (<http://sportsworld.nbcsports.com/virtual-reality-sports-arkansas-kentucky/>) Which is not actually completely true. The history of cybernetic virtuality can be traced back to the mid-1960s, which shows that these technologies are not a completely new idea. The 1990s brought major achievements in VR tech and interactivity with computer generated reality. Indeed, today there is "a renaissance" of these technologies taking virtual reality to the next level and taking the medium to the mainstream. "A revolution in virtual reality is underway – consumers can now explore virtual worlds with the natural use of their hands and eyes thanks to affordable devices such as the Sixense STEM and Oculus Rift." Virtuix Omni™ (<http://www.virtuix.com/about/>)

As Bifo wrote in his last book, *AND. Phenomenology of the End*, we live in a time of external machines that shape molecular and sub-individual flows. Our mental activity is involved in non-linear forms of networking in the digital infosphere, where the machine comes from outside and leads to a break of subjectivity contracted in a system of references connecting every element to other elements. This is no longer the structuralist architecture of subjectivity. In this fragmented and multi-layered, rhizomatic machinic structure our experience of time, memory and history, and the social brain, are modeled by a universe of transmitters and receivers. In this process, we find the co-option or possession of the aesthetic and emotional sensibility, because our subjective experience of time and our 'ability to imagine the future' are goods that are the target of semio-capitalism or machinic capitalism. They are trapped by technolinguistic machines, smartphones, etc., that organize our living sensibility and our memory about the future and the past, and control and affect our presence, and our ability to think critically, and lead to cognitive mutations.

Adrien Guillet in his project *Citracit* digs up the layers of the Trans-African Company with which André Citroën intended to establish a tourist circuit in Africa, in reversal of André Citroën's approach, investigating how ideology and form interweave.

He writes in his artist statement: "In this parallel reality opened up by the Citracit project, Citroën is no longer a constructor of cars but embodies the very notion of exoticism, adventure and travel in the way of popular travel agencies."

In this play of typographical détournement lies the essence of the Citracit collection. The artist's appropriation of the Citracit collection of souvenir gifts are a marriage between the African artisan codes and techniques, and a selection of second-hand promotional Citroën products.

André Citroën's most ambitious project, the Compagnie Transafricaine Citroën was established to carry passengers and freight on regularly scheduled trips across the desert. A new type of travel experience that promised protected panoramic views of colonial landscape, an exclusive twelve day adventure.

"Citroën and Tourism in the Sahara (1924-1925). CEGETAF/CITRACIT(1924-1925) was an ambitious project initiated by André Citroën to establish a regular automobile service between French North Africa and French West Africa and at the same time to attract high-end tourism to the colonies. The project was a total failure; the hotels that Citroën built in the

middle of the desert were sold off to the army before they were ever used, and Citroën himself refused to speak of the plan after its cancellation. However, the elaboration of this project provides an interesting case study of the political and cultural ramifications of an attempt to rationalize the French Empire both geographically and symbolically. Despite its ultimate failure, the short history of CITRACIT shows Citroën's understanding of the prevailing colonial psychology. Couching his argument in terms of technical rationalization rather than of military conquest, and adding an element of fantasy that would appeal to the budding tourist market, Citroën was able to garner considerable support from the French State for his venture. The silence that followed the cancellation of the project was complete, though the name of Citroën was linked in the press to another major mission, the Croisière noire, a journey across Africa in Citroën-made vehicles. This diversion of public attention confirms the extent to which the French Empire remained an unknown in the public imagination during the interwar period; the idea of the Empire could therefore be easily manipulated according to the political climate in the metropole."