

AN EDUCATED GUESS

JANELLE ZARA

Josh Kline, *Poverty Dilation*, 2016. Cast silicone, shopping cart, polyethylene bags, plastic zip tie, rubber, plexiglass, LEDs, and power cord, 45 × 40 × 50 in. (114.3 × 101.6 × 127 cm). Collection of Barbara and Howard Morse. © Josh Kline. Photograph by Joerg Lohse; image courtesy the artist and 47 Canal, New York. Special thanks to the Whitney Museum of American Art.

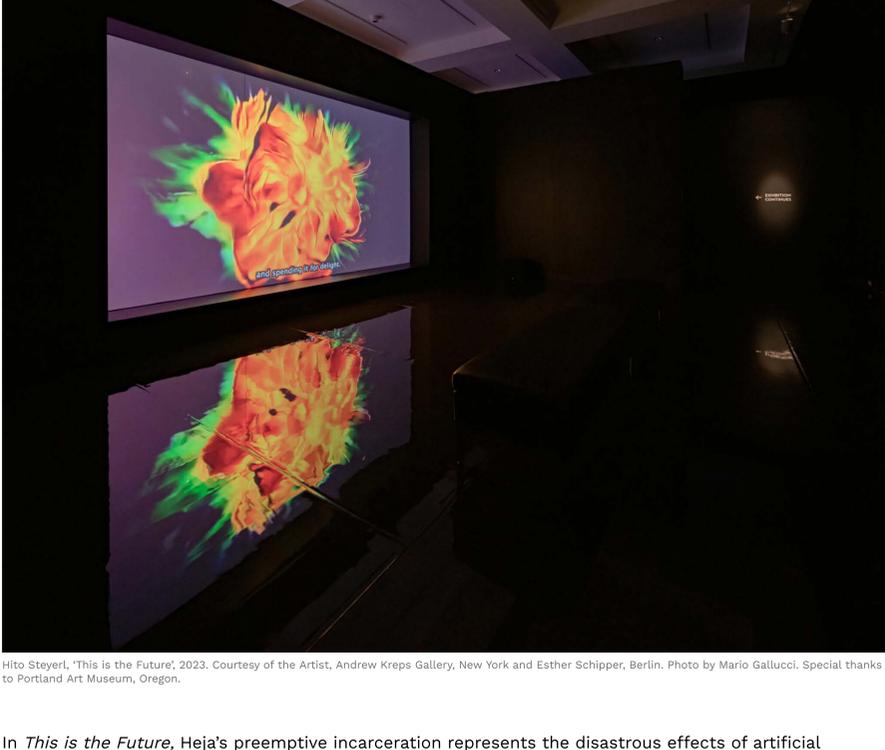
Feed · Essay

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This is the Future (2019), a filmic essay by Berlin-based artist Hito Steyerl, is about the eternal and eternally useless human quest to predict what lies ahead. In woozy, continuously melting footage, we glimpse Stonehenge as an ancient divination tool before traveling to the immediate future. Our protagonist is Heja, a woman imprisoned for a yet-uncommitted crime predicted by a neural network. As a narrator, the neural network explains how it based that prediction—as well as that of credit rates and life spans—on “extreme probability.” Suddenly an alarm sounds.

“Danger! The future poses a 100% risk for human health,” the network warns. “Statistically, in the future, all humans will die.”

In Steyerl’s satirical rendering, artificial intelligence is a bumbling, glitching idiot, crunching pretty unassailable logic into absurdly sensational conclusions. This is more or less an accurate portrayal of how the technology works. AI “generates responses based on patterns,” ChatGPT recently explained to me; programs like the popular chatbot take vast quantities of data and boil them down to a series of averages and probabilities, scrubbed of extremes and outliers. These datasets are then used to make predictions: a conversation with ChatGPT is simply a string of statistical likelihoods derived from language models, just like certain softwares will identify potential criminals based on who’s already in prison. To Steyerl, AI amounts to a plodding brute force that blunts the messy complications of reality into a series of neat statistics and dehumanizing algorithms—no nuance, no compassion, and no common sense. Rejecting “artificial intelligence” as a misnomer, she prefers the term “artificial stupidity.”



Hito Steyerl, *This is the Future*, 2023. Courtesy of the Artist, Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York and Esther Schipper, Berlin. Photo by Mario Gallucci. Special thanks to Portland Art Museum, Oregon.

In *This is the Future*, Heja’s preemptive incarceration represents the disastrous effects of artificial stupidity in real life. Predictive policing is a very real component of what artist Mimi Qnūqha’s calls “algorithmic violence”: forms of inequity inflicted by automated decision-making systems. In her 2017 essay, *Notes on Algorithmic Violence*, she notes the inherent bias of COMPAS, a widely used software that assesses criminal likelihood based on the defendant’s neighborhood, wealth, and parents’ marital status—all factors that disproportionately target communities of color. “As we continue to see the rise of algorithms being used for civic, social, and cultural decision-making, it becomes that much more important that we name the reality that we are seeing,” Qnūqha writes. “Not because it creates new inequities, but because it has the power to cloak and amplify existing ones.” In other words, the insistence on predicting the future simply prolongs and reinforces the status quo.

This is the funny affinity between artificial stupidity and the artistic imagination: both present visions of the immediate future that are in truth exaggerated portraits of the present. In Josh Kline’s 2023 Whitney Museum exhibition, “Project for a New American Century,” the artist envisions the consequences of artificial stupidity on the labor force. In the face of automation, where algorithms manage hours and productivity, blue collar workers are devalued as mere sets of parts—disembodied arms labeled with brands like FedEx and Amazon, still clutching digital scanners. Noting the rising lifelike qualities of virtual assistants and chatbots, he takes the automation epidemic into the displacement of white middle class white collar workers—accountants, administrators, and lawyers, all locked in the fetal position inside clear plastic bags like recycling on the curb.

Josh Kline, *Desperation Dilation*, 2016. Cast silicone, shopping cart, polyethylene bags, rubber, plexiglass, LEDs, and power cord, 46 × 29 × 40 in. Collection of Bobby and Eleanor Cayre. © Josh Kline. Photograph by Joerg Lohse; image courtesy the artist and 47 Canal, New York. Special thanks to Whitney Museum of American Art.

Kline’s indictment is not of the algorithms themselves, but the capitalist culture of extraction powering them. The truth of artificial stupidity—both its beauty and its scourge—is that this technology is ultimately neutral. Think of AI as an impressionable child; its actions are a reflection of our own values, and as of now, it’s still capable of very little on its own. “It doesn’t have personal experiences, opinions, or awareness,” ChatGPT reminded me, citing features of artificiality that cannot be replicated. Where learning is averse to exceptions and outliers, worthwhile art is inherently exceptional; it relies on the emotions and irregularities that algorithms lack.

In the unlikelyhood that we choose humanity over efficiency, Kline has noted AI’s potential for liberating us from drudgery. In the hands of artists, artificial stupidity has proven useful in removing much of the grunt-work of generating art. In 2010, it would take Kline two weeks of painstaking pixel-by-pixel alterations to create what we now know as Deepfakes, a face-swapping effect that AI can now do in an instant. In *Power Plants*, the companion installation to *This is the Future*, Heja’s digital garden is powered by algorithms; alien yet strangely familiar flowers of the future bloom in a state of continuous evolution, where each frame is a neural network’s prediction of 0.04 seconds into the future. Appealing to the simple human appreciation of beauty, Steyerl’s film ends on a surprisingly optimistic note—a reminder that the future is not set in stone, and every day presents a new series of choices. “Whatever the future will be,” Heja says, “it always starts here and now.”

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Area of Focus

HOW CAN WE UNDERSTAND COMPLEXITY?

Changelog

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