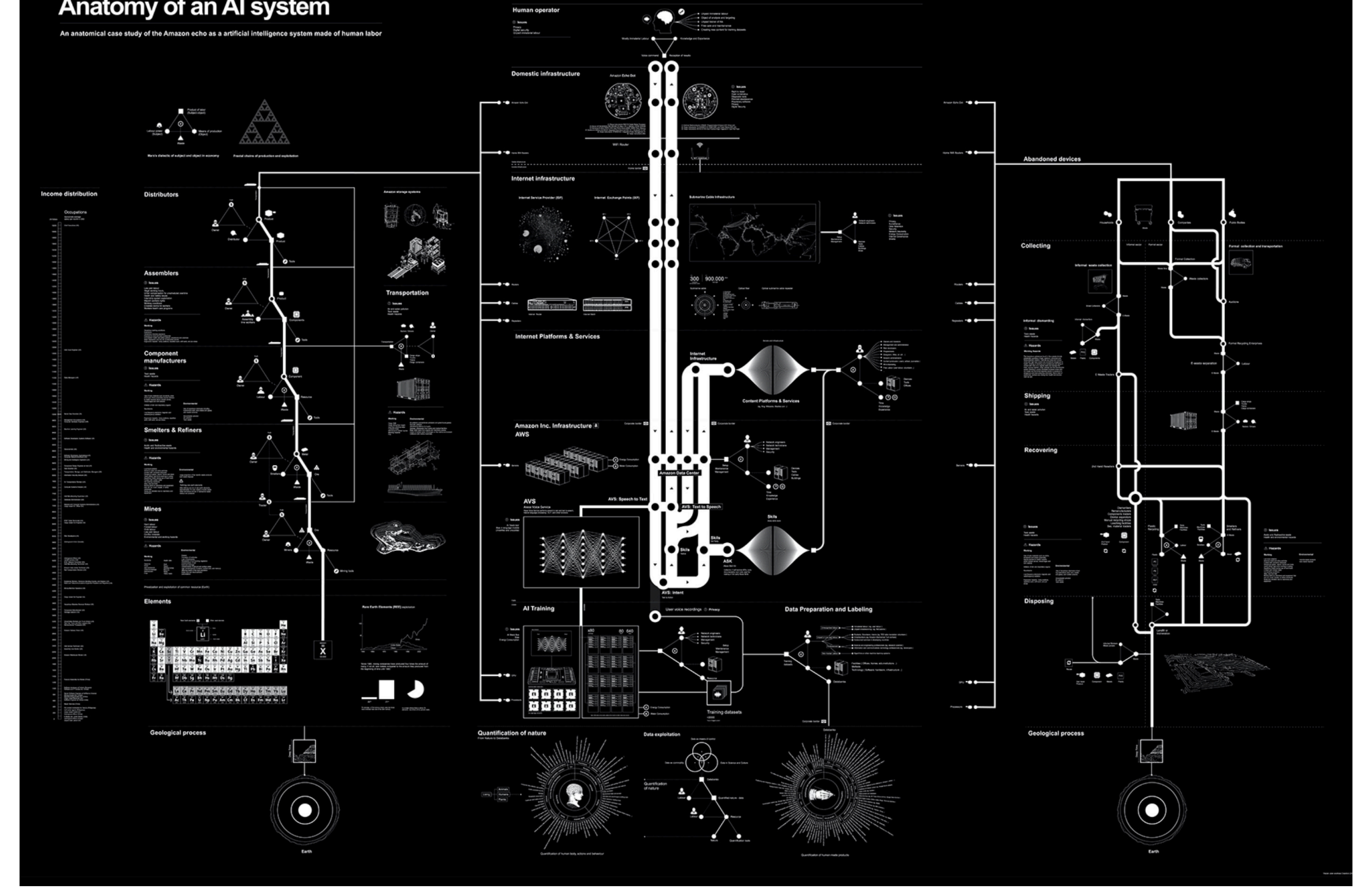
Anatomy of an AI system

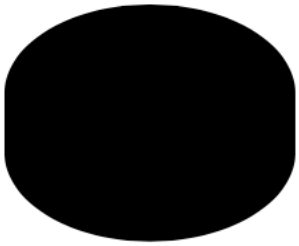
An anatomical case study of the Amazon echo as a artificial intelligence system made of human labor



Anatomy of an AI System

The Amazon Echo as an anatomical map of human labor, data and planetary resources

By Kate Crawford[1] and Vladan Joler[2]
(2018)



I

A cylinder sits in a room. It is impassive, smooth, simple and small. It stands 14.8cm high, with a single blue-green circular light that traces around its upper rim. It is silently attending. A woman walks into the room, carrying a sleeping child in her arms, and she addresses the cylinder.

'Alexa, turn on the hall lights'

The cylinder springs into life. 'OK.' The room lights up. The woman makes a faint nodding gesture, and carries the child upstairs.

This is an interaction with Amazon's Echo device.[3] A brief command and a response is the most common form of engagement with this consumer voice-enabled AI device. But in this fleeting moment of interaction, a vast matrix of capacities is invoked: interlaced chains of resource extraction, human labor and algorithmic processing across networks of mining, logistics, distribution, prediction and optimization. The scale of this system is almost beyond human imagining. How can we begin to see it, to grasp its immensity and complexity as a connected form? **We start with an outline: an exploded view of a planetary system across three stages of birth, life and death, accompanied by an essay in 21 parts. Together, this becomes an anatomical map of a single AI system.**