Noise Performance as Knowledge Production: A Speculative Database Aesthetics of ImageNet

Intro:

GOVERNANCE is a performing contradiction, a trick to the system. It wonders aloud how performance itself can form partial systems of knowledge making, and how these knowledges might be used to decode or change taxonomies from within. It voraciously metabolizes truths, prefering to linger in a dialectic.

GOVERNANCE INC is our (Rebecca Uliasz and Quran Karriem's) collaborative audio-visual noise performance project. Our performative interventions under this moniker sonically and visually engage with digital and analog material from our ongoing practice based research through analog synthesizers, digital tools, and custom made hardware.

We view Governance as an exaggeration of the performativity of knowledge production; an investigation of the gestures, affects and embodied dispositions that are culturally legible as 'knowledge work' and imbued with a veneer of 'objectivity'. We seek to "shift the frame" away from the norms of scientific discourse to question the conditions of the production of knowledge itself. In posing as a pseudo-scientific bioengineering startup, Governance Inc. became the umbrella project for us to situate the idea of "performing discourse". We draw from the Foucauldian notion of **governance**, a regime of power in which knowledge production itself is subject to instrumental governmentality. The project is concerned with how power, executed through machinic and automated reasoning processes conditions knowledge production and contemporary aesthetic regimes.

Part 1: machinic governance/ infrastructure/ decision and temporality

We attend to the way that expression of power is made possible and automated through the datafied infrastructure that determine our conditions of existence, the way we interface with and perceive the world. With the permeation of machine learning technologies into the fabric of the everyday, the opacity of the discourse around these technologies has particularly troubling effects. If we maintain that they are in fact, instruments of knowledge production, our own inability to confront the inhuman way they *know* the world opens a vortex for exploitative, racializing or otherwise oppressive and violent logics to appear in new spaces, as if by natural cause. If we follow this notion that these technologies, and the big data that they mechanize operate in a realm distinct from human sensation, we risk collapsing the confrontation that machine learners are imbricated with oppressive logics that extend far back into the history of mankind, specifically, the logics of capital development. So how can one ground a critique that at once resists apprehending these technologies through the tainted tools of philosophical discourse, while also maintaining that this is not a futile project?

We believe that the "black box" rhetorics around machine learning technologies isolates humanities discourse from technoscience and reifies disciplinary boundaries in unhelpful ways. The so-called "black box" is built and maintained by people, so the idea that it is opaque to cognition is of limited utility. It is not possible to 'open' and make transparent to rational logics because it is a crystallization and extension of rationalization— it is not a box, but an operational abstraction.

Rather, ours is a practice of "being with" technics in a way that privileges the affective experiences their run-time operativity affords from the standpoint of human perception and in-the-moment collectivity. Like all instrumental performers, we deploy body techniques and practice to come to an intuitive, extra-rational understanding of the affordances and potentials of technical mediation. Our practice is an exaggerated and literal embodiment of the scientific experiment— the praxis of being and working with machines is made explicit through its aesthetic product.

We distance ourselves from calls to understand or expose the logic of the machine and instead, consider the ways that *all logics are operational*, that is, all ways of knowing are performative and temporal processes, imbued with the **authoritative function to decide what makes meaning, what matters and what does not.** By linking the pre- or extra-computational roots of operationality to its computational present, we posit a critique of the supposed political neutrality of knowledge production. The performativity and symbolism that inheres in the donning of the labcoat bears a certain homology of 'objective affect' with the literal opacity of mechanized or computational operations. Extending this critique into our practice, we wonder aloud what other types of temporal practices might produce different decision structures, ones that are uneconomic, inconclusive, indeterminate, or irreducible.

Part 2: performance and indecision, improvisation, noise practice and embodiment

How does performing a discourse-- engaging with it visually, experimentally, or narratively-- allow new readings of the assumptions it contains? How can performance, as a form of knowledge making, decode or change given taxonomies?

The noise form is about the radical exploration of alternate possibilities in real-time with and in relationship to other bodies. It shares a lineage with 'experimental' in that it is about creating a set of conditions that you don't already know the 'answer' to before it starts. The recording does not encompass the entirety of the artwork, because the art here is the encounter itself. The lived encounter is the moment that the significance of bodies is made paramount-- it both signifies and reveals that a body is never a blank slate. We suggest that engaging the body and activating the framework of experimental noise performance might allow a different expression of the database logic that increasingly undergirds and orders our aesthetic regime, visual culture, and social norms.

For example, our engagement with ImageNet, the big data set prevalent in training image recognition algorithms that Becca already discussed, we mined ImageNet (prior to its scrubbing of controversial categories it previously contained) to present the material to an audience in an aesthetic mode and encourage dialog about the politics of the dataset's curation. Using digital and analogue synthesizers and live generated imagery, we sonified and projected images and text contained in this dataset. Less interesting to us than the idea of an expose of the racist, sexist, and xenophobic categories contained within the data, we are interested in how this decision strucutre can be made affective. Our experimental engagement doesnt claim to add up to a new system of meaning, but attempts to make decision *felt* and experienced on a sensory register. Through rearranging, selecting and manipulating the material that machine learning systems metabolize to produce "truths", we seek to produce different affective relationships with the archive that imagenet presents. The archive is made material through and in the body. We suggest that the archive might be performed differently precisely by claiming that the archive is always performed in the first place.

Through practice, the performer values history in the form of embodied knowledge and has confidence in his ability to make improvisational choices in real-time. The performer also recognizes that 'choice' isn't the only way to create—the unexpected, imperfect or accidental often give rise to valuable aesthetic forms that do not and cannot arise from isolated reason. Through practice, the improviser painstakingly creates processes and structures that allow for new forms to arise through a blend of real-time choice, the execution of previous plans, and accidents. We wonder how performance acts as a site to reprogram the decision automated by a technical system. Improvisation doesn't try to include everything. It is generative at the edges where it fails, and what it fails to explain. We find that defining a set of questions is a much more interesting project than knowing the answers.

Part 3: noise and capital, DIY politics

What's important to us about this is that it is a non-commodity. We realize that, today, the coincidence of material freedom and subject position required to make non-commodities is a fragile privilege. By performing radical difference, we hope to open dialogues about why this is so, and speculation on what alternate forms of relationship and circulation might exist. We also realize that no practice is an island, and that commodities therefore undergird the production of non-commodities.

At the same time, we use noise as a way to engage with the technicality of thought, treating thinking as material itself. We might think of our approach to performance media as engaging with protocol through crafting infrastructures of sound and image production. The material infrastructure of machines constitutes the space of flows that is not divorced from our bodies as performers, and the bodies of those around us. The social relations of the noise space are part of the performance infrastructure, the performance itself becomes a temporally defined decision making structure that incorporates lived contingency, but never claims to form a coherent or rational whole. Recording, then, presents an obstacle for noise practice. The recording is by definition archival and a separate practice that depends on idealized environments (the studio), is separate from audiences, and exists for its ability to circulate as digital commodity for realization of social or economic capital.

The videos we share are records of events that happened at a specific place and time, with specific individuals in the room. Though the record is captured in a specific set of bits that can be emailed, streamed or downloaded, the context of the performance itself remains only in the bodies of those present at those conjunctions in space-time. This suggests that there are aspects of human experience that are irreducible to inscription and automation.

We locate noise and innovation at opposing edges of inclusion. As neoliberal capital seeks to appropriate practices of resistance, including all desires, taming them to the rubric of innovation or engineering, we hold that noise shows us that the infinite resists explanation. Improvisation can not be compressed. We see the problem to be improvised upon as part of a messy network of relations never reducible to the technological or scientific solutions. Improvisation expands the temporality of decisioning, lingering in the blurry space that precedes deduction. Improvisation doesn't put value within the representation, the proof, the object, or even the aesthetic but rather gets by by evading form, shape, capture. Improvisation patterns and unpatterns, coils back into itself, disappearing as readily as it appears, falling back into the whole. Improvisation thrives in the opaque, where all axioms become malleable.