*The Self in the Age of Design. From Human Enhancement
to Machine Learning: Towards the End of the
Enlightenment?*

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The Self in the Age of Design. From Human Enhancement to Machine Learning: Towards the End of the Enlightenment?

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Superhumanity: Design of the Self, New York: e-flux, 2018. Ed. by Nick Axel, Beatriz Colomina, Nikolaus Hirsch, Anton Vidokle, Mark Wigley

Is the Living Body the Last Thing Left Alive?: The New Performance Turn, Its Histories and Its Institutions, Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2017. Ed. by Cosmin Costinaş and Anna Janevski

- 1 Henry Kissinger, political scientist and ex-national security advisor, twice secretary of state and Nobel Peace Prize laureate, announced, in an article published in June 2018, nothing less than the end of the Enlightenment.¹ According to him, Artificial Intelligence (AI) and the swift development of machine learning are to blame. Whereas the invention of printing in the 15th century opened the way to Enlightenment, allowing rationality to prevail over religious dogmatism, Kissinger considers that the extraordinary technological revolution currently underway is transforming human knowledge into an act of mechanical accumulation, a gigantic database. The Enlightenment allowed the development of human rationality and the results of this development were disseminated by technology. Kissinger believes we are now moving in the opposite direction: potentially dominant technology is being produced and it is in need of a new philosophy.²
- 2 Although he does not directly quote him, Kissinger uses some of the pivotal sections of Immanuel Kant's famous essay, *What is Enlightenment?* (1784). Kant defines the

Aufklärung as the process of “man's release from his self-incurred tutelage”, as a liberation from his “inability to make use of his understanding without direction from another.”³ Fear, cowardice and the lack of courage are lambasted by Kant as the main reasons of this enslavement to another. Kantian *Aufklärung* defines the will to reason and its free exercise as ethical obligations. Negatively defined as an exit from the state of tutelage, it was analysed by Michel Foucault at once as a public and collective process, and a personal obligation, of which humans are simultaneously “elements and agents”.⁴

- 3 Kissinger's arguments are the continuation of the thought process initiated by the Foucauldian reading of Kant, examining what distinguishes our times, in what way they are different in relation to the authority of reason and our enslavement to others (be they humans or machines). Simultaneously, however, he defines this historical moment as an exit from *Aufklärung*, thus reversing Kant's argument. At the present time humanity is experiencing a moment for which it is perhaps still unprepared philosophically, because its power of interpretation of the world is at risk of being overtaken by technology.⁵
- 4 What is at stake here is our will to reconceptualise human rationality in a context where laziness and convenience encourage us to delegate our most basic cognitive operations to machines. Rethinking our rationality has become all the more urgent because of the development of genetic engineering, techniques simulating human cognitive processes, deep learning algorithms and instructional design, which massively relate to the question of design. Recent publications attest to this: design is central to our lives, in its material and objectal dimensions, as well as applied to human lives and to what constitutes the self, conscience itself. Hence the question: has design become a new manifestation of rationality?
- 5 This radical extension of design as a practice connected to identitarian, genetic and increasingly digital processes is central to the collection *Superhumanity: Design of the Self*. The “superhumanity” in question consists of the aspects of our species that have been transformed by biopolitics. Caught in informational networks and fluxes, humanity is connected, assisted and sometimes even surpassed in certain tasks by machines. The editors consider that we, humans, have always been shaped by the objects we create and by the exercise of thought. In this sense, faced with an imagined technological threat, we have perhaps never been more human.⁶
- 6 The modelling of conscience, body and life, is the leitmotiv that connects the different contributions by architects, artists, historians, philosophers, archaeologists, anthropologists and scientists, published on the editorial platform *e-flux Architecture* in connection to the third Istanbul Biennial of Design (2016-2017), entitled “ARE WE HUMAN? The Design of the Species”⁷. Considered through the perspective of an “end of Enlightenment”, the Istanbul Biennial's catchphrase, “Design is always design of the human!”, reactivates a question that is central to modern philosophy: that of the limit between the self and the world, of what distinguishes one from the rest of the world and how one is connected to it, of what connects one to oneself.
- 7 The very notion of design, similarly addressed in each essay, relates to the immateriality of cognitive, social, and economic processes, to the production of objects of art and science, to debates on the humanity of great apes and climate change, to humanitarian emergency architecture or Frederick Kiesler's magic constructions. The diversity of the contributions is remarkable. However, two genealogies emerge from

the book. Both situate their positions in regards to Friedrich Nietzsche. The first considers the death of God as a breaking point preparing the technological shock of the 1960s, the second performs a Foucauldian reading of Nietzsche from a historical and genealogical perspective, and dates self-design back to Antiquity or the Enlightenment. In some instances, design of the self is considered as a recoding of each individual's economic interests and psychological and political attitudes into external media, in order to create a second artificial body which would potentially survive humanity (Boris Groys). In others it is encompassed in a long-term history that coincides with the very formation of the subject. Brooke Holmes⁸ thus opposes Groys's perspective on the modern individual ordered to self-design because of its non-compliance to external norms to the Foucauldian vision which situates activity within the subject, and whose care of the self is a form of freedom. Closer to Foucault, Holmes considers the design of self as a persistence of the question of the physical body [*soma*] as the primary object of *technè* during Antiquity (6th-5th century BC), namely medicine and its ambition to overcome and relieve suffering.

- 8 But the persistence of design of the self's therapeutic aim and all its beneficial effects (medicine, learning, support) go hand in hand with the fact that for the first time in history, humanity is confronted with major choices concerning the future and its very design as a species: the ambition of design is now to enhance humans and no longer merely to repair them.⁹ Brigitte Munier highlights a "generalised and accelerated technologisation" of society and bodies that breaks the continuity between nature, technology and symbolism by which Marcel Mauss characterised the body when he wrote that "[...] the first and most natural technical object, as well as technical means, of man is his body".¹⁰
- 9 The broken continuity with nature and the focalisation on the body as technical means and object of design implies that our times must be situated in relation to the Enlightenment project. From the mechanical duck that swallows and digests food, invented in the 18th century by Jacques de Vaucanson, to the children automatons – one of which draws a portrait of Louis XV while the other writes "I think therefore I am" – that were displayed by Pierre Jaquet-Droz and his son in 1774, to the recent series *Black Mirror* and *Westworld*, the question remains identical: "what constitutes our humanity?", "are we human?", a question necessary to any attempt at designing a non-human entity and developing machine learning. However, we are still far from being able to consider the existence of an independent intelligence or understanding the intricacies of the brain and human intelligence.¹¹ However, caught between ecological damage and technological uncertainties, the impact of genetic design and ready for use information, humans are forced to reflect on the traces they will leave for the more than doubtful future of the species. In the midst of these debates, the increasing critical interest for past political, social and aesthetic projects offering a total design of life, such as Russian Constructivism and Bauhaus, is understandable. However, there is another territory that emerges from *Superhumanity: Design of the Self*, in which human resistance towards machine-like behaviour is played out in a particularly explicit manner. In her article, Sylvia Lavin¹² discusses one consequence of the geological era of the Anthropocene, the "archival impulse"¹³ which incites humans to reflect on the useful traces left to future – possibly not so distant –, human-less times, seen as a form of resistance. Archives are actually irreducible to mathematical operations. They require, in order to be viable, the human act of deciphering, a reconstruction that is also a construction of our memory. The reason why many artists and architects, from

the 1960s onwards, have turned towards archival practices is probably the sign of an acute artistic, ethical, historical and political conscience.

- 10 This same conscience is addressed in *Is the Living Body the Last Thing Left Alive?*, in which the history of performance and the emergence of the “field of contemporary dance” in the 1990s are identified as privileged loci for the exercise of memory in action. Performance refers all at once to a living artwork and to economic productivity. It becomes the channel for opposition between a world of objects and immaterial economy, which all at once resists neoliberal commercialization and is confronted to job instability and the devaluation of work.¹⁴ Referencing Sven Lütticken, Francis Fukuyama and Pierre Nora, one of the contributors, Boris Burden conceptualizes the model of a world of *general economic performance*, where producers and products are ordered to perform memorable events for clients in order to guarantee future commercial success. Memory is increasingly disconnected from the past, it becomes a projection whose *design* belongs to the future.¹⁵ Boris Burden’s analysis, whose scope reaches from the fetishist relation to memory, as denounced by Pierre Nora, to the incapacity to anticipate the future, is in agreement with Sylvia Lavin’s interpretation. The current tendency to accumulate everything that could be used as an account or a proof of what we are confers an unprecedented power upon museums, archives and databases. The author emphasises the fact that the Enlightenment, however, already considered history more as a locus of experience than as accumulation of past events.¹⁶ In the continuity of this, the book is an invitation to reconsider our relationship to history and memory as performance: as a living body who, by its critical action, reconnects past, present and future together. This is sufficient proof, if proof was needed, of the Enlightenment’s viability.

NOTES

1. Kissinger, Henry. “How the Enlightenment Ends”, *The Atlantic*, June 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2018/06/henry-kissinger-ai-could-mean-the-end-of-human-history/559124/?silverid-ref=MzEwMTkwMjQ2NDgxS0>
2. *Ibid.*
3. Kant, Emmanuel. “Beantwortung der Frage : Was ist Aufklärung”, *Berlinische Monatsschrift*, décembre 1784, vol. IV, p. 481-491, <https://www.saylor.org/site/wp-content/uploads/2011/02/What-is-Enlightenment.pdf>
4. *Ibid.*
5. Kissinger, Henry. “How the Enlightenment Ends”, *Op. cit.*
6. *Ibid.*, p. 9
7. In collaboration with the National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art (South Korea), the Covett Brewster Art Gallery (New Zealand) and the Ernst Shering Foundation, events in connection with the project took place in New York, Havana, Princeton, Madrid and Seoul. A further publication is scheduled for the end of 2018.
8. Holmes, Brooke. “Prescribing Reflection”, *Superhumanity: Design of the Self*, New York: e-flux Architecture ; Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press; The Graham Foundation, 2018, p. 27

9. *Technocorps : la sociologie du corps à l'épreuve des nouvelles technologies*, Paris: François Bourin, 2014. Ed. by Brigitte Munier
 10. Mauss, Marcel. « Les techniques du corps », *Sociologie et anthropologie*, Paris : Presses universitaires de France, 1950, p. 372
 11. For a criticism of the fantasies and intellectual fallacies surrounding Artificial Intelligence, see: Tritsch, Danièle. Mariani, Jean. *Ça va pas la tête ! Cerveau, immortalité et intelligence artificielle, l'imposture du transhumanisme*, Paris: Belin, 2018.
 12. "History for an Empty Future", *Superhumanity: Design of the Self*, *Op. cit.*, p. 107. Also see: Bruno, Giuliana. "Storage Space", *Ibid.*, p. 201-207
 13. Foster, Hal. "An Archival Impulse", *October*, vol. 110, Autumn 2004, p. 3-22
 14. Introduction, *Ibid.*, p. 7
 15. Burden, Boris. "Dance ME to the End of History: Art and Performance between History and Memory", *Ibid.*, p. 83
 16. *Ibid.*, p. 86
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Tania Vladova is a professor of Aesthetics at the ESADHaR (Rouen). Her research focuses on the theory of images and the relation between art and knowledge. She is a member of the "Voir" research team and has recently organised, in collaboration with Colette Hyvrard, an international symposium: *L'Image sans qualités* (Rouen, 2018), and edited "Après le tournant iconique" (*Images Re-vues*, special issue n°5, Autumn 2017). Her recent publications include "L'image des grandes découvertes : lieu de la sérendipité ?", (*Image et savoir*, Université de la Réunion, 2018), "August Schmarsow et la Kunstwissenschaft, à partir des Congrès internationaux d'esthétique", *Zeitschrift für Ästhetik und allgemeine Kunstwissenschaft* (vol. 61, 2, 2016), "Luigi Pirandello: la voix du théâtre face à la machine qui parle" (*Annuaire théâtral*, Université de Montréal, n°55-56, Spring 2016).