

Interview

Maria Redaelli,

May 2020

1- What does it mean for you to be a new media artist? How did you come up to working with new technologies?

I've always been fascinated by understanding new technologies, trying to open up and understand these black boxes. Through this process you can find poetry or interesting ways or re-appropriating these systems which are being used more and more in governing our lives. Being a new media artist for me means having an interdisciplinary mind and giving equal attention to the process and research but also the concept, message and execution of the work. I came from a tradition Fine Art background (The Slade School of Fine Art, UCL), where I was one of the only people using code as my medium, but technology has always come naturally to me ever since teaching myself Photoshop and 3D modelling software and then to code as a child. At the Slade my professors pushed

me to consider why I was using computer code as my medium and what I was trying to say with it. I think creating meaningful art using new media is a difficult balance as we're working with such new materials and there is no rule book, but in turn this also means it's an exciting time to be creating work.

2- Some critics and theorists find redundant and useless the concept of 'new' associated to media and technologies, what's your opinion about it?

I have a complicated relationship to the new. In my recent work I've been exploring machine learning technologies which are currently on the cutting edge of what the machines we design are capable of. The technology is moving so fast to the point that the code I used for an artwork a few months ago will no longer run on my computer as everything it relied on has changed and been updated. I do feel however that for artwork to stand the test of time it needs to transcend the 'new' which can serve as a gimmick. My favourite artworks move beyond this, considering the message and often containing poetry in the conceptual simplicity, such as works by John Cage or Nam June Paik. On the flip side art can be

used as a way of making new technologies more accessible and bringing a new audience into the conversation, finding important subjects to investigate such as the politics and workings of artificial intelligence.

3- "Solid State", "Digital Caress" and "Behind the screen" focus on materiality and interactivity, but in your further works, it seems like you have abandoned them. Why did it happen? Do you plan to work with those concepts again in the future?

I've always been intrigued by the crossover of the material and the virtual and the way we mediate the world through the technology we use. Materiality is definitely a theme which I'll come back to. I'm currently interested in thinking about ways of using screen technology in unexpected spaces, such as out in nature (CUSP, 2019) or as a physical presence on a stage (Zizi, 2020). I think interactivity can often be used in digital art without much intentionality, but if a project came up where an interactive element would significantly add to it then I would explore it, for my future works Zizi I'm considering how performers on stage could be interacting with a machine learning system.

4- AI generates supernatural systems and in your works, reality and virtuality are mixed creating hybrid worlds, like in “CUSP”. How do people usually react to that?

CUSP was a piece where I created where artificially generated marsh birds were projected onto a screen which I then planted in the mud out on the Essex marshes (East coast of England). Responses very much varied depending on who the audience was. I got A.I. researchers coming to see my work who fully understood the technology behind the work and were more interested in which specific algorithms and detests I'd chosen. Others read it in a more reflective & poetic way, spending time in a dark room in front of the work just taking in the forms created by the machine and the tranquillity of the natural landscape. When being interviewed for the BBC4 Video Art Documentary (Kill Your TV), Jim Moir exclaimed 'I reckon Jake's Job is safe, you'll always need a human video artist to come up with such a bonkers idea'.

5- How important is ephemerality in your art?

Ephemerality is certainly something which comes up. For instance when getting a

neural network to create what it thinks are the most pornographic images (Machine Learning Porn, 2016) it created abstracted fleshy forms which we don't read as human but to the algorithm are 99% pornographic. When uploading it to Facebook, Youtube & Instagram however it was removed for being too pornographic giving it a transient existence. Similarly in my work Digital Whispers (2016) which whispers out tweets from a radius of the work's installation creating a sea of sound. Something odd happened to this work over time, Twitters regulations regarding GPS tagging changed and therefore the essence of the work changed picking up less and less tweets. I like the idea of the piece going silent at some point in the future perhaps when the code changes or when twitter no longer exists. Data has a permanence to it, but the code I'm using is very much impermanent, replacing itself so fast that preservation becomes a complicated task. I'm interested in thinking about the preservability of digital work, a piece like CUSP for example (as with other works of mine) exist in a video format documenting a performance so the work has a permanence.

6- A couple of your works deal with pornography: do you think that the digital medium, as it is perceived as 'cold', is the ideal expedient for reflecting about our relationship with technology?

Absolutely, I've always found it quite an amusing contrast. Seeing cold systems interpreting or fixating upon human intimacy. But of course this is just us humans projecting and showing our tendency to anthropomorphise the machine. It's important to remember that these systems are just cold number crushing processes which improve from the data we decide to feed it.

7- Could you tell me something more about your last work “Zizi”? In the curatorial text, it is stated “If AI holds a mirror up to society, then Zizi applies the makeup”, what does social engagement and social critique in art mean to you?

The Zizi Project is an umbrella term for my current project which is using the queer performance form of drag to investigate artificial intelligence. Zizi's name combines the non binary pronoun Ze & the z-vector which is how we can navigate what the algorithm has learnt.

The starting point of the project was about queering the dataset. I took a standardised

dataset of images of faces called FFHQ created by American engineers and which gets used to train facial recognition algorithms. I then injected it with thousands of faces of drag performers and queer identities. This caused the weights in the neural network to shift, so when asking it to generate completely new synthetic faces from scratch instead of generating fairly homogenous normative faces it starts to create something much more fluid, queer and expressive.

Machine learning reflects the biases of the people who are building it and the data they feed it. So we need to be very aware of what happens to marginalised communities and discrimination within these systems we are building to govern our lives. Art, performance & drag is a fun and engaging way of exploring these issues. This is the idea behind what Drew Hemment (Edinburgh Futures Institute) wrote "If AI holds a mirror up to society, then Zizi applies the makeup".

8- The last question I can't miss: what's your projects for the future?

We've already talked about The Zizi Project which is currently in development. I can't go into too much detail but I'm currently working on the next stages of the project which involve working closely with a drag

queen and thinking about how AI and performance can work together and inform each other. I'm also hoping to expand on my work CUSP creating interventions in nature, possibly with more permanent installations, to think about this changing world we're living in.