Genevieve Costello :

On Computational

Horizontality

AK   Could you talk a bit about your background, and how the idea for your essay 'Userscapes: The Ambiguous Agent in a Computational Paradigm' came about?

GC   As an undergraduate I went to art school to study fashion and sculpture, but then got frustrated by prescriptions of what we were taught, what one needed to do to be 'the artist', and moved to critical theory. For my undergraduate thesis I did a study on Facebook, which was still somewhat young at the time. I ended up doing data analysis and strategy at one of the largest media agencies in the world in New York City for some time and it was really interesting to see what data was being collected in the media and advertising realm, and used for redefining the positioning of brands, products, and ad campaigns. It was fascinating to see the other end of the interface layer from a cultural vantage point. Then I was a producer at a small cultural agency in NYC which offered a completely scope and scale of things. I wanted to do research full time, so I went to the Cultural Analysis department at the University of Amsterdam for my MA. This department really informed my understanding of concepts of modernity, de-coloniality and posthuman studies. For my thesis I did a close reading of contemporary artworks (a VR game called Pig Simulator and Holly Herndon's music video HOME) using theory from Walter Mignolo, Elizabeth Povinelli, and Kathryn Yusoff with 'The Stack: On Software and Sovereignty', a book by Benjamin Bratton. I wanted to bring together these different perspectives around the anthropocene and taking stock of contemporary technologies, from humanities and philosophy to ethics.

The concept of Userscapes is based on the idea of five scapes, formulated by anthropologist Arjun Appadurai. He positions five scapes (ethnoscape, technoscape and finanscape, mediascapes and ideoscapes) as always fluid and shifting, and shaping the global flows of ideas and information, social and political impressions. He talks about these flows in the context of the imaginary, imagination as social practice. I was also really interested in the idea of computation as force, as intelligence and agency of geologies and technologies tangible (in one of many ways) through common languages or contemporary post-digital life. I felt like materiality was disregarded in a lot of conversations around technology and computation, for example, in relation to inequalities or differences in the way things are felt across different places in the world. It is important to make sure we're tying the 'planetary scale computation' conversation back to its lineage of modernity, globalization, capitalism, and the material problems that already exist and need to be dealt with in addition to the mass energy and material production of it all: the sociopolitical inequalities, systematization of violence, precarity. Uniting or bringing together those perspectives and theories was important for me in my thesis and in the article.

AK The title of your thesis is 'Becoming User'. How do you understand becoming in this context? When does someone become a User-subject?

GC I'm looking at becoming- as an ongoing movement of constitutions by practices, energies, elements, rather than a stagnant or closed understanding of being. An ongoingness, becoming- is a reference to (the beloved) Deleuze and Guattari. The way we understand a user right now is problematic. You sign up for an account on a platform, let's say Facebook. We repeat this a thousand times for the various accounts and decisions with any platform. These are not sites of becoming. This is a practice of stepping into the position of being a user-subject. You are subjectified by the platform, and your subject-position in each platform is isolated, singularized, even though often interlinked — for example, when you are using one account to verify another account. This is not so far from using your driver's license to get a bank account, or bank account to get a mobile contract. In the article I mention that the user-subject positions maintain certain blinders. The image of yourself that is given to you is limited and not an accurate representation of your actual coalitions of data from different movements, across platforms and anything connected to them (such bank cards and transit cards). Our interactions and different user subject positions are much larger and layered than we can see: a possibly infinite scape.

Becoming-user is about understanding that you are moving between, and holding different relations to many different platforms and beyond. It's tapping into your relationship with computational potential, as one of the many languages that may make into a practice a certain understanding of actors that make the world. It is not a position with walls. It's not closed. As I'm acting, I'm taking in energies and information, and that positions my understanding of the world, my sense of being, what I have access to on a practical level, and what are my limitations. What are the things I can and cannot do within different platforms? It's about the friction of access and sites of agency in a more fluid sense. It is a different kind of agency.

AK I am really interested in the idea of computational horizontality and horizontal interface that you put forward in your article. Could you give an example of that?

GC You are never stuck to one site. When you interact with technology, you activate a column in the stack, and you're stepping into the position of a user. But you can step into this position from many different places, or in many different user-positions in one place. For example, my phone is active right now, and I have multiple apps that have geolocation switched on. I'm also on the computer, which is using geolocation. And we are Skyping through the Wi-Fi in the house, which uses broadband and not a fiber optic cable, and it is different from the mobile network. And all that is happening at the same time. As a user, I'm holding these positions simultaneously. I'm all of those things layered. So horizontality is in physically being at one point in time and space, but at the same time being in all of those different positions that are forming an interwoven scape. Some of these sites don't even have a clearly visible interface. I'm not thinking of my geolocation on my phone because I'm not actively using it, but it is always on. I can also be acting in composite with someone else, let's say a bot or many, in that one user position. And this is not felt by me either. I think there should be a way to emphasize the many user-agents that co-determine a singular image of a user-subject. And the many different user-positions that may or may not be informing each other from my particular site.

What could be an example of a horizontal interface? I'm thinking about this moment when you start downloading something from torrents, and you see the seeds just as moving numbers on the side of your download. This is very simple, but it indicates that something you are doing is very much a part of your present, but it's also the others that are making it feasible in your real time, and whatever that time may be for them. I think it's very important to not anthropomorphize other users, to not make into a subject the relations between others that you're inherently connected with in this user layer. A user is not necessarily something that has a profile. User-positions could be designed as amorphous vessels that agents move in and out of.

AK In my essay I refer to Tung-Hui Hu's book 'The Prehistory of the Cloud', in which he puts forward the idea that 'personal user' was created for purposes of isolation. Personal login protects you from messy interactions with other users; it provides you with a sterile, safe environment.

GC I recently moved to London to do a PhD in the media arts department, and I'm also a part of the information security group (ISG). My proposal is to look at security as a humanities concept. It is about what it is to feel secure, and I think this has a lot to do with care, as an action. What you said about the sterile environment completely rings true to the interest. One way to think about the concept of security from a positive approach is to link it to an attacker, always starting from the premise of securing something from the malicious act. You need to have a private user profile, as you don't want other people to have access to your information. It could be used in a to harmful way against you.

A personal profile with set (and more easily secured) parameters of exchange reinforces the self as something that you are entitled to, a legitimate person you are very much responsible for. Using an easy password is at your own risk. But should livelihoods be built on the premise of insecurity and distrust of external, other users, in the organizations of our exchange? This is not to disregard the reality of attackers or maliciousness. Being is not isolated and sterile.

AK Today's interfaces consider humans as the only kind of agents. Why do you think this is dangerous? And what could be an example of non-human-centric interface?

GC Yes, it's dangerous because even for pre-digital interfaces, the question of what is 'human' has often been in reference to a very specific kind of human. Many people are not treated as humans. This is a premise of colonization and a major issue of modernity. I think that needs to be acknowledged when we talk about who is allowed to be a user, and how that's distributed very unequally. It also assumes human intelligence as precedent! If we are using interfaces that make exchanges with other intelligences, let's learn. We are a novice species and dangerous to ourselves (among other things) in our ignorance.

I was recently looking at chatbots and how they are being used. Many chatbots are emblematic of human-centered design, and it's deeply problematic. I don't think we need more service to help us be individuals, acting as producers and consumers. At some point, chatbots were entertained as potentially replacing platforms as a sort of cross-platform/search engine/calendar/personal assistant. I remember an advertisement with a holographic anime girl in a little jar container that sat on a bed stand. She makes a person who lives alone feel like they're not alone, and have a servant or caretaker instead of having interpersonal relationships. Reinforcing precarity and (self-responsible) individualism, hyperactive consumption and production in the mechanism of capitalism. I think we can use bots in different ways, maybe without using the term 'use'. Becoming-user is very much about acknowledging agency coming from various forces, from all sorts of species and computational entities.

AK You did a workshop with Cristina Cochior called 'Nobodies for bots', with the goal of making humans understood by bots. How can such understanding be achieved?

GC We were playing around with the idea of language. Let's say, as a foreigner you share a common language of English, and the way you use English is very different from someone whose mother tongue is English. When you interact with people, the way they use language always influences you. It's a beautiful way to open up a common language, and it makes that form of English very situated between the time, the place and the capacity. With this workshop, we wanted to do this with the computational agent. The exercise of the workshop was to make a bot, but not to force it into performing the language that you want to give it. The idea was to meet the bot somewhere halfway, to be influenced by what it means to code and program something, and therefore to have expectations and exchanges with an acting entity without presupposing or imposing on them. It is not a language to be mastered. It's a language to be affected by, to manifest in getting to the meeting point.

AK It makes me think about Alexa and voice assistants that sometimes do not understand certain phrases, so people have to talk to them in a very specific way. Is that an example of how humans are affected by the language of computation?

GC Exactly. Before doing this practical workshop, we were researching different sites of exchange for the bot. Alexa should not be lending itself to me. Technology shouldn't lend itself to me just to function in the way that I want things to function, because then nothing happens that reflects the actual exchange in this moment — only a predetermined desire is seen. I heard that Google tells their employees they should lean in and whisper to the phone when talking to Siri, which can be read as infantilizing Siri. If you look at the history of the bot or embodied artificial intelligence objects, there always has been some sort of demeaning, whether in feminizing the bot or in framing it as a servant, a pet, a monster. It is important to understand that the man of modernity is the human of technology right now, in its current structure. This is the premise of the user-subject, and the citizen of the nation-state, and the producer-consumer. And that is a problem of social reproduction within these systems. I see computation as one potential language in its contemporary unraveling of these much larger underlying issues that have been around since long before the internet.

AK How can we approach bots and computational agents differently? Should we call them by sets of numbers, instead of by feminine names?

GC   I also don't think it needs to be a set of numbers. It's interesting when you think of different naming conventions, for example, those that indicate a history. Is a set of numbers effective or tangible? What if it could indicate the complicated histories of material constitution, and intertwined scapes or activations of user-agents? What about naming practices that reference the entire ancestry for many generations? It could be really interesting to have a version of informational heritage as method for all the activations that are happening with our different devices; a back-reference to the minerals that were used to source the bits of the device, which points of contact have been key or trivial in its movements. It could be symbolic stacks, user-positions as totem poles, representing ancient user-agents acting in them.

AK   What could be a way for humans to become more aware of their own position, and of their relationships with other Users?

GC   I think it's the imaginary as a social practice that needs to happen. It's coming back to the idea of computational language not as code, but as the compositing of a new site for commons, the civic, a new site for exchange. I think there's a potential for it to be more on the surface. We need tangibility that is affective, and coming in an open, intimate way. Following Donna Haraway's 'Staying with the Trouble' and an affirmationist approach, how do we become entangled in these piles of being?

Science fiction has made interesting images of humans and agents in this way. We need even more of this. I'm currently starting to write a radio program about four kids in the post-individualist era, and they live in four different collectivist-living societies. The story is about their communications and issues of growing up within, through, by, digital technologies. I wanted to reposition how digital media are reshaping relationships in our everyday lives in a very tactile, felt way. I hate it when TV shows picture somebody texting with a phone, and there is always a bubble on the screen and the sound of the keyboard. It's a reductive image of digital media that have permitted so many affective, beautiful things to occur with the global citizen. If the user is not tethered to the nation-state, if it is not a geolocation, or a producer-consumer… Then what is the social entity greater than it, that secures its being and exchange? I think there needs to be a tactile, affective turn of experiences of that kind. Intimate social spaces of life and world-making through Usership — stories of love, of home, of care…

AK   Do you think fiction could be a strategy to achieve that?

GC   Yes, 100%. When you're reading a book, you are painting an image of it in your head and it makes an imprint. It is immersive in that it is codetermined — you are an active agent in the image and feelings that arise from it, as the words are that are offered to you to do so. I think that space of imagination is very important, because the action of it makes it embodied.

We are so activated and triggered in formats that ask for reactions; we are not encouraged to codetermine our daily exchanges on digital media. For me it is not common to make the image of someone texting me, if I am asking where we are meeting at the library. But if I imagine them, it has a similar imprint, an affective situating. We need things that indicate the embodiment of exchange, and this doesn't come from the image of the profile on a platform that compresses the user into the medium and content. If you are imagining the person texting you in the way that you would read a book, constructing a scene from some shared context, there is an immersive experience of exchange. And this is amazing, weighted, and feasible! We need interfaces that encourage these kinds of experiences of being within the digital.
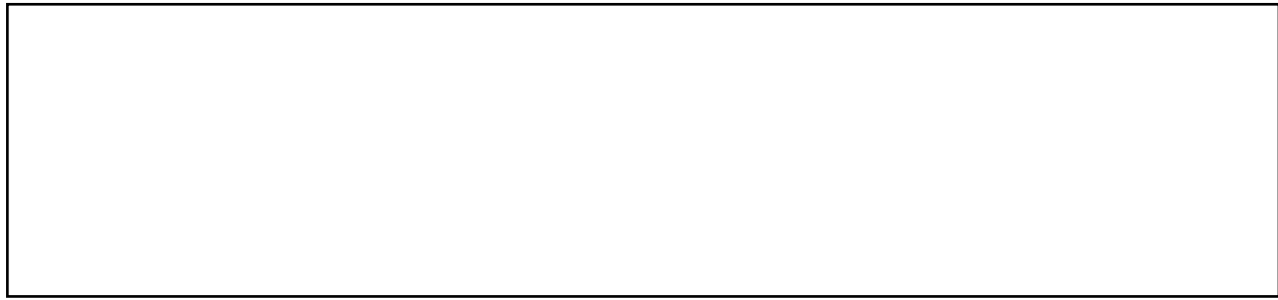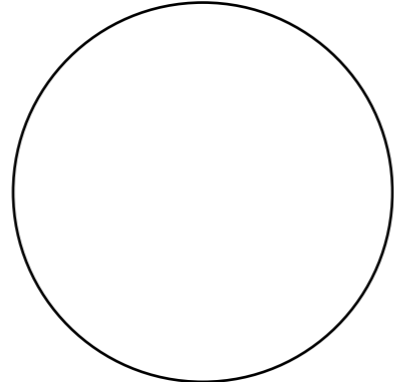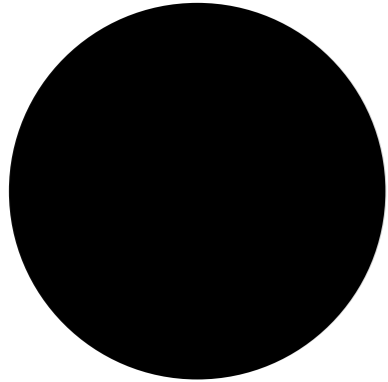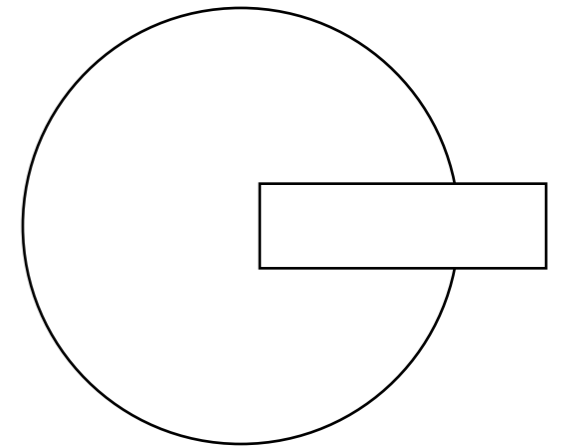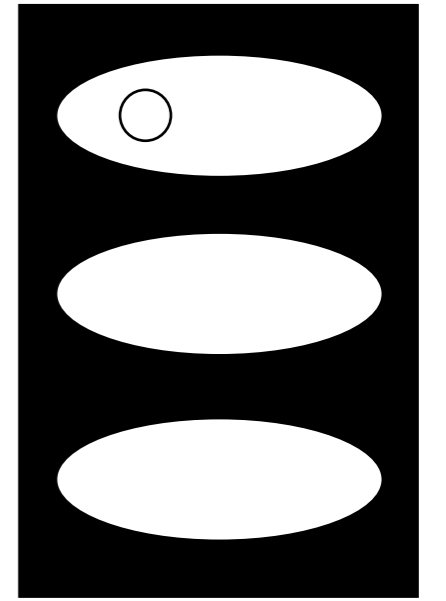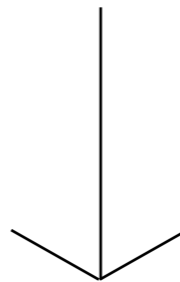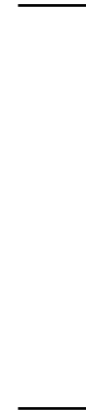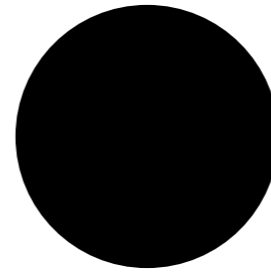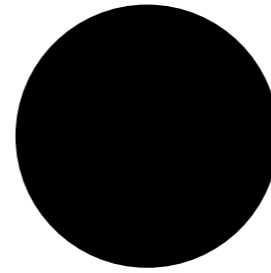
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