Ward off the unpresentable

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T.C. You work at Praticable, a design studio, that "favors autonomy". How would you describe your role as a philosopher within a group made otherwise of designer and developers? How does this multi-disciplinary environment feed your thinking?

A.P. My production has three dimensions: philosophy, design and code. Philosophy stands at the core of our studio practice, not only in its legal form (we choose to be a cooperative) but also in what we engage together. We are a small design business based on philosophical principles. With the other members, I work on these principles and how they translate into practice. I sometimes say that I work on the founding *positions* that lead to *pro-positions*.
I am involved in the early stages of most of the projects, and in the studio's background reflection. Through words, I conduct in the field of design philosophical questions such as: "what have we done, what are we doing, or what are we about to do? What is the *digital*? What is a *game*? What is *design*? What is a study? Is this thing useful or harmful? Fair or unfair?". I sometimes work on words *in vogue*; sometimes on requests we are addressed.

Together, we decided to focus on the question of *autonomy* and its objective conditions, i.e. the objects allowing an *autonomous* conduct. It is important to distinguish this autonomy from, for instance, what the current French government means by *autonomie des université*s (autonomy of universities), which actually consists in asking universities to cope with fewer resources. On the contrary, to produce the objective conditions of autonomy is *to give the means to do*.*To give the means to do* is not to make people *do* things, nor is it to guide them in *doing* thing. We strive not to give technology a definite end: our proposals remain open, and present options for different uses and purposes. In short, we create *praticable* (practicable) tools.

My role in the studio is not limited to philosophy. I have been working with designers and architects for over six years, and I also teach in these fields. Even though I don't think I'll ever be fully a designer—partly because I don't draw—my formal ideas are clear enough to guide the production, which they do.

Although I started to code only two or three years ago, it has already become a significant part of my work. I enjoy the logical "tinkering" that programming is made of. I love the web and comput-ers. I like understanding and using them. To me, it's important that technical knowledge of digital technologies is shared among the studio members. Indeed, Jean Prouvé was a blacksmith before he became a designer. So I code small things that can be done without a full team support and require minimal maintenance. For example, I created an interface for "studying studies" of TMNlab,[1] or our studio's website[2].

T.C. The origin and multiple meanings of words hold great importance to you. How does this inform your thoughts and perspectives on technology?

A.P. I'll let the words speak for themselves once again. "To form" and "to formulate" obviously share grounds. I think the challenge of my work is to give form to what is generally forgotten about the inherent nature of technique. If etymology is the structure of language, then my interest in etymology is of the same kind as the interest some architects or designers would show in exposed structures.
Louis Sullivan, an American architect whose importance is not always appreciated, spoke in a text called "Ornament in Architecture"[3] about "the beauty of our structures". According to him, this *beauty* is a kind of *goodness* because it is *open*, *in the open*: it presents the consistency of what has been built, of what has been made. When covered with ornaments, wrapped, plastered, decorated, disguised, this consistency gets forgotten. Though it remains, underneath.

Computer servers bother us? We disguise them as "clouds" to make them more acceptable. A problematic technology is adopted under the guise of symbols and representations. It reminds me of a line from a Godard's movie *Deux ou trois choses que je sais d'elle*, said while the camera isolates the word *car* in a car-wash sign: "Why all these signs that make me distrust language and overwhelm me with meanings, drowning reality instead of setting the imagination free?"

Concealed technologies—servers, cables and everything the digital consists of—remain, and continue more secretly to *act* and perhaps to *harm*. It's hard to become aware of this concealed consistency, let alone to speak about it. It becomes *indisputable*. So-called "dematerialized" technology do rely on materials, and what materials! Scarce materials, whose extraction is highly problematic. The society using this digital technology shamefully holds on to it, and shies away from the issues it raises. It is not proud of what it does. Could we

be proud of the *consistency* of our productions and formulate them *openly*?

The same goes for language: its consistency, its structure gets forgotten. We forget that the words "server" and "service", which are widely used today, imply *servitude*. In computing, we speak of *menus*, *calls* and *requests*, *servers* and *customers*. These words all carry a desire to be served, as much as possible, by machines and programs, as we would be in a restaurant.

But being served comes at a price. We are unaware of what goes on in the kitchen of these servile automatons: the conditions under which these services operate, the operations at work in the back kitchens, the materials, the people, the energies activated. Out of sight, to guarantee our peace of mind, kitchens, factories and waiters overwork and over-heat. We start to feel the heat all the way here. But we don't see it because it's all covered with discourse. Etymology allows us to discover the consistency of things. The challenge of this work is *lucidity*, which we lack of. I think we should be more aware about what happens in the kitchen.

We should be more concerned about what we are being served in general, and by computer servers in particular. But we should also be concerned about the fact these servers are sometimes *taking* this so-called "data"[4]. Servers not only serve, they accumulate information. They are less *servers* than *ex-changers*, or *capitalizers*, as I suggest. Capitalizing on a work commonly means two things: *keeping* (stock) and *using for other purposes* (value). *Stock* and *value*, isn't it what the cloud is about?

Nevertheless, we speak less about value than stock. Who wants to demonstrate their good faith will say they have nothing to sell, and nothing to win, put in another way, that they speak honestly, unselfishly. It seems advantageous for the valuation function—which is ultimately financial—to be forgotten. The term "capitalizer" covers this aspect in addition to the data storage and concentration ones.

T.C. You gave your presentation at Tangible Cloud in French intentionally. The meaning and origin of words vary among languages. Does this indicate that language and word choice can alter our view of the digital world?

A.P. If words were only vehicles for ideas, then perhaps ideas could change vehicles without any consequences. But is this what speech is all about? Looking at it this way, we confuse speech with communication. To put it simply, I would say that we communicate a lot but speak little, maybe never really. However, we should try. Speaking is not just using language, but practicing or playing it, like practicing or playing a musical instrument.

My English is good enough to communicate, but not good enough to play with. Yet, working with language—especially in philosophy—is about manipulating language and even *cheating* it. Why cheat with language? How to interpret this «salutary deception» once mentioned by Roland Barthes?[5]

Everyday language rules our common understanding. Through rules, even tacit ones, power operates. Thus, the term "server" encourages us to accept a technique under the guise of free service (after all, who would refuse a free service?), while concealing the way it uses us. Cheating, not respecting the established rules, not saying what is normally said or what is considered proper to say at a given moment, allows us to resist to this power present in the language.

T.C. In the 1960s, Simondon studied the will of industrialists to conceal the technical functioning of objects, such as motorcycle engines, which became progressively covered with a body. Your hypothesis is that there are two phases in the life of technical objects. The first is the *raw*, *naked* state, where nothing is concealed and which tinkerer love. The second is when the invention enters the social sphere. This is when the raw state becomes "indecent" (without decoration) and the "covering" is operated. According to you again, words, like bodywork, cover or uncover technical objects. How do the words *photography* and *cloud* fit into this scheme?

A.P. Once again, I owe this thought to Pierre-Damien Huyghe[6]. There is a value in comparing these two words because they designate partly similar technologies, yet with opposite socialization logic. That logic is better uncovered at the early stages of an invention, which is why I will refer to the early days of analog photography.

Both *the cloud* and *photography* are based on recording operations: in the first case, by writing on *hard* drives, and in the second, through the impression of light on a particularly sensitive surface called *pellicule* (film) in French, itself derived from the Latin *pellicula* ("small skin"). But if the word *photo-graphy*—literally *writing* (*-graphy*) of the *light* (*photo-*)—rather accurately models the

operation at stake in the *hardware* (the case), the word *cloud*, on the opposite, contradicts and dampens the fundamental hardness of the technique. The quality of a cloud is indeed the complete opposite of the characteristic hardness of the tons of hardware required for our digital infrastructures.

This form of diversion is nowadays common and, to a certain extent, accepted. Take the term *users*: it denotes a figure that is not a *consumer*. Yet, quite often, this word is used to designate a kind of *consumer* of IT services who is assumed to know nothing about their operations and their *hardware*. *Software* catches the users attention at the expense of *hardware*, which is where the most urgent issues currently lie though.

I suppose the covering of the raw materiality of technique is necessary for its diffusion in the society. In society, it is for example frowned upon for a computer technique to be shown unprotected, even though its components originally amazed tinkerers and inventors. Socialization implies an *indecent becoming* (metamorphosis) of the naked technical body (in IT: the hardware and the code). Etymologically, *indecent* means *without decoration*. It seems that decoration is a social requirement.

The camera does not escape this covering process. The transition to digital has led to the substitution of the film—this thin ultra-sensitive skin—with a more discreet sensor no longer handled directly. Some "expert" cameras still grant access to this sensor by removing the lens and allow to adjust the sensitivity through cogwheels, buttons and interfaces. But for ordinary users, a single shutter release is good enough as they do not need to know how the machine produces an image.

Thus, photography is subject to debate, and its comparison with the cloud is not binary. However, while the popularity of its name reflects not only acceptance, but also a definite taste for the technical operations within the object, the name of the cloud indicates a denial of materiality. The term *cloud*, like some dressings in cooking, masks the true taste of the technique it covers. As users, we are limited in our roles and do not have the true experience of this technique, which has a metallic and pungent taste. We are anesthetized, i.e. deprived of sensing what we are using as a result naively.

We use the simple word *cloud* to describe a complex network of information storage and processing machines. How to come up with a more accurate designation and "call a spade a spade"?

It's not easy. For reasons partly described in an earlier response, I propose the term *capitalizer* to describe these operations of concentrating, storing, and valuing information. Although unlikely to be adopted, I wish to defend the seriousness of this proposal. After all, wasn't the word *photography* itself strange at first?

T.C. You made the hypothesis that the term "cloud" would *exonerate* technique. What did you mean by that? Is technology initially guilty, and if so, of what?

A.P. I may have lacked caution or precision. I don't think technique is guilty per se. What is technique but a *potential*? A potential is neither *guilty* or *innocent*; it is only *possible*. As for specific technical products, one can wonder whether they are useful or harmful. But this question can only be asked if products are first treated as suspects, without prejudging them guilty or innocent.

Suspicion calls for an inquiry. Most of the time, products are rejected as a result of this critical analysis. So the problem is not so much the innocence but its presumption that prevents us from investigating a technique. However, the situation is complicated by the unequal distribution of technical education required to carry out this investigation.

Again, I think that the term "user" refers to someone with limited technical knowledge who can be easily manipulated. In contrast, the leaders of some of the large organizations that use the term cloud have a very high level of technical knowledge. Bill Gates, Elon Musk, Steve Jobs, Larry Page and Sergey Brin… are professionals, technicians, who know things even better these days because they supervise the whole production chain.

They cannot ignore how much this production exhausts the labor forces and the planet other than by a pathological denial that should be treated. Instead, they behave like watchdogs: they patent, cover up, stifle business, deny access to factories, codes, prevent disassembly and access to product components. They know and prevent others from knowing, which is perverse conduct.

Strong barriers are thus established around technique. This could be seen as a guilt. However, it is difficult to have this discussion in a world that upholds the separation of business, politics and morality. Challenging this separation is fundamental.

T.C.   How do you interpret the recent renaming of major digital companies (Google becoming Alphabet, Facebook becoming Meta…)?

A.P.   The activities of these companies have expanded beyond their initial products, and their new names reflect this expansion. By switching to generic names (Alphabet, Meta), they can refer to a wider range of products and activities. So I think it makes sense.
However, this switch lacks frankness, as it makes the relationship between the products and their parent company more difficult to notice. Alphabet does not associate its name with its products as Google did: Google Car became Waymo; Google X became X; Google Life Sciences became Verily, etc. Alphabet, the parent company, fades into the background with its name only appearing in small print on the websites footers of its numerous subsidiaries. Thus, it becomes increasingly difficult for us to understand the current oligopolistic situation; a situation that gets worse as these companies diversify and become ubiquitous. This is what finally makes me the most worried.

It is well known that Google—now Alphabet—is also YouTube, Google Chrome, Android, Gmail, Google Drive, Google Nexus, Chrome Book and Google Earth… Similarly, Facebook, now called Meta, also includes Instagram, WhatsApp and Messenger. However, what is lesser known regarding these name changes are the recent expansions of these companies beyond their original scope, including the establishment or acquisition of firms with often mysterious activities in domains that are typically reserved for public power such as health (Calico, Verily), mobility (Waymo), and currency (especially through cryptocurrencies). This increase in power is obtained discreetly at the expense of public power, politics, and the collective conduct of our living conditions.

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[1] See: http://www.tmnlab.com/etudes/etat-des-lieux-du-numerique-2021.

[2] See: https://praticable.fr/.

[3] "Sullivan, Louis. "Ornament in Architecture." The Engineering Magazine, August 1892. Adrien Payet will soon propose a French translation, which does not exist at this time.

[4] Nominative plural of *datum* ("that is given"). https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/data

[5] Leçon inaugurale au Collège de France

[6] Numérique, la tentation du service

Further readings

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