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BURRICE ARTIFICIAL: DECODIFICAÇÃO, PROTESTO E PANDEMIA
ARTIFICIAL STUPIDITY: DECODING, PROTESTS, AND THE PANDEMIC
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Abstract

This paper presents an art and technology experimental project entitled *Artificial Stupidity*. The project aims to explore alternative ways of understanding the global pandemic scenario of covid-19 established in 2020, and the digital technologies as the main mediators of this period. The work uses sound to propose a reflection about the protests that occurred in Southeast Brazil, São Paulo, between April and June of 2020, known as *janelaços*. The sounds of the protests were recorded and automatically transcribed into text by an artificial intelligence application present in many smartphone models. This action reveals what type of decoding these devices make out of the troubled social scenario they are mediating.

Keyword: Digital art, Artificial intelligence, Pandemic

1   Introduction

Many disruptive events are marking the global landscape in 2020. In Brazil, there is a complex political scenario combined with the pandemic context. Despite their already known ubiquity, digital technologies have gained prominence during the period of social isolation. Taking into account this scenario, increasingly permeated by technologies, we ask ourselves what kind of reading these types of devices make of the current urban landscape. We may say that we have never been so digital, not so much as a matter of choice, but because of the configuration that took place amid the Covid-19 pandemic, in which the only possible encounter became digital. With that premise, we developed an artistic project entitled *Artificial Stupidity*.

The project consists of capturing audio from protests that took place against the federal government during this period, known as *janelaços* or *panelaços*[1]. After that, the audio recordings were processed by an audio-

to-text transcription software, which uses an artificial intelligence system to identify the sounds. Due to the audios' heterogeneous characteristic and its different sources (sounds of pans, screams, conversations, music), the noises often confused the system, which resulted in misinterpretations, or interpretations based on a different type of decoding.

Thus, *Artificial Stupidity* is an experiment to understand the perception of non-human agents in the context of protests during the pandemic. In the protests' audios, some words are lost in the air and the system makes other readings of what is said. In a kind of artificial-Dada-poetry, audios are transformed into text by decoding properties of the same electronic devices that were the mediators of social isolation.

The protests took place in several cities in Brazil, mainly from April to June 2020. They were characterized by the population banging pans and shouting against the government's actions - or inaction - from their windows. Unable to leave their homes to protest, the sound proved to be a powerful medium. While streets were empty, invisible crowds could be heard. With their sound potency, protesters filled the spaces with the sound waves that transformed the city landscape. The routine changed temporarily: days were marked by the silence of empty streets and nights were marked by the noises, screams, and banging of the protests.

2   Disobedient Windows

Artificial stupidity is part of a larger project, entitled "Disobedient Windows"[2]. It is the result of a research project carried out in the "Art and Interface Design on Urban Scale" course, taught in the first half of 2020 by Prof. Dr. Giselle Beiguelman, in the Postgraduate Program in Design at the Faculty of Architecture and Urbanism at the University of São Paulo - FAUUSP. The "Disobedient Windows" project investigates the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic in the urban context of the city of São Paulo, using mainly sound as a political indicator and social marker during quarantine.

Besides *Artificial Stupidity*, the project resulted in four other works. The first one is a three-dimensional platform, which explores a sound guided geography, entitled "Dissenting Windows". The second is "We Are Still Alive", a video piece selected for the Argentinian *Bienal de la Imagen en Movimiento 2020*(Bienniale of Moving Image)[3]. The other two are visual essays made by Alline Nakamura and Marcos Piffer. All the works are available on the project's website.[4].

3   Humans and non-humans in the same analysis plan

Actor-Network Theory (ANT) (Latour, 2008) is one of the main theoretical inspirations for the development of this work. In ANT, more than the facts themselves, what is in evidence are the actions and the network that is established from them. Through ANT, Latour works against nature/culture divide, developing another conception of the social. It differs from the classic sociological view, which understands society as exclusively human and apart from the realm conventionally called natural. The author argues that, for the classical notion, the social is understood as something fixed, as a fact of reality, in a real, substantial scope that already presents itself almost as an independent entity. Against this sociological metaphysics, Latour suggests thinking about the social through the notion of *association*.

Therefore, Latour (2008) proposes that we work through associations, mapping the network that is built between them. Yet, we must not consider that there are pre-defined actors since the actor is only an actor at the time of the agency. Thus, the action is conceived as an event, more than anything else. The notion of agency is defined by the reverberations it will have within the network in which it operates. If there is no effect within the network, it is not agency.

With this definition, we can qualify objects - and, mainly, technical objects - as actors. This is to say that objects also act. When we talk about agency, we are not referring to a notion of cause and effect, but of events within the network. Within ANT, we can place the two orders of events – human and non-human – in the same analysis plan, so that we can map the relationships and associations that unfold in each event.

In *Artificial Stupidity*, we propose that the audio recording devices and the integrated transcription application, which accompanies this equipment, can be a source of research and understanding of the audible dimension of the landscape, in this specific context. The project works, mainly, with the aesthetic dimensions of sound, dealing, however, with a different type of sensibility. This analysis and aesthetic production are developed concerning the non-human actant, in a type of decoding that differs from ours.

4   Performative sensibility

André Lemos develops the notion of performative sensibility from the Internet of Things (IoT) network. According to the author, Internet of Things is defined as

> A network of relatively autonomous objects, whose actions directly interfere in public spaces, at home, or in the body, whether with the current projects of smart cities, smart homes, or wearable objects. (Lemos, Marques, 2019, p. 1, our translation)

IoT objects have a type of connectivity that allows them to interact without human mediation. These interactions work with a different kind of sensibility, far from its usual meaning. It is not our senses of sight, hearing, touch, smelling, and taste that enact perception, but the objects themselves through specific types of sensors and different parameters. Consequently, that is how Lemos defines performative sensibility

> These objects feel the world, produce data, and act autonomously and independently of direct human intervention. The particular way of feeling the world, of communicating and acting on other objects is what gives specificity to the IoT. We call this quality performative sensibility (PS). (Lemos, Bitencourt, 2018, p. 166, our translation).

Thus, *Artificial Stupidity* explores, within the ANT methodology, the performative sensibility of the audio recording device and the audio-to-text transcription enabled by the artificial intelligence application. What is the system's perception regarding this specifically troubled soundscape?

5   The making of the stupidity

For the execution of the project, the protests that occurred between April and June 2020 were recorded on audio in different parts of the city of São Paulo. The recordings took place in the neighborhoods of Bela Vista, Consolação, Barra Funda, Cambuci, Santa Cecília, Pompéia, and Ermelino Matarazzo. These audios were then processed by a transcription application available for smartphones. The transcription process, performed after the audio recordings, was captured on video, resulting in the final audiovisual content. These results are available on the project's Vimeo website at https://vimeo.com/showcase/7445124.

The audio transcription was performed using a mobile audio recording application. It is the standard application present on *Samsung* devices, one of the leading companies in the smartphone industry. For the development of the work, we used the *Galaxy S9* model and the *Voice Recorder* application in version 21.2.22.06. We did not develop the program itself, as our interest was to understand what decoding this type of standard device application would do. When we talk about decoding, we are referring to the process of transcribing one code format into another, in this case from audio to text.

Samsung's voice recorder is a closed source, and discussing how it works is beyond the scope of this article. We use the application from the user perspective. We can articulate this point of view based on the philosophy of the black box, which Flusser (2018) develops about photography. The black box refers to the internal and unknown processes of devices. Flusser argues, for example, that "the photographer masters the device (camera), but, because of his ignorance of the processes that happen inside the box, he is then dominated by it" (1985, p. 44, our translation). Likewise, the user is unaware of the internal workings of the transcription application, still using its functionality.

In *Artificial Stupidity*, we make another use of this system, outside its programmed contexts, confronting it with the chaos of banging pans and the protests' cries. This process occurs in three main moments:

+ Protests are recorded with the smartphone itself, depending on the time they occur.

+ The audios are transcribed into text in real-time by the application.

+ The process is subsequently recorded on video, by capturing the device's screen.

It is important to emphasize that, in the presentation of the videos, the complete text already appears on the screen, since the decoding of the audios in texts precedes the video recording. The video is made at the reproduction of the recorded sound, generating a final file, saved on the device, which also contains the text information. Even so, it is possible to perceive which sound is assigned to each written word through a color indication. The black text changes to blue when the associated sound is played. The video recording happens simultaneously to the reproduction of the already recorded sound, not to its capture.

When we talk about incorrect decoding of the system or other type of reading based on its *performative sensibility*, we are referring to its programmed functionality of transcribing exactly what is heard in the text. In fact, when confronted with the countless sources of sound, which are not so clear, the system ends up confusing different words and transcribing noises, through a decoding system that makes associations

between sound and written word different from ours, human. This phenomenon can be seen in the videos presented.

Artificial Stupidity operates in resonance with the concept of artificial stupidity developed by Micheál O'Connell (2016). The author points out the notion that stupidity can be a facilitator of discovery within pre-established systems, and in the artistic creation process. Beyond that, we understand that *Artificial Stupidity* makes a different use of the device, subverting it into a dysfunctionality. It is through this operation that the work gains its experimental content. This allows access to the poetic content of an artificial intelligence system, which does not have tools for understanding a set of collective disturbances of the soundscape where it is inserted.

6   Final considerations

The Covid-19 pandemic required rethinking forms of communication. Digital technologies, which had been available for some time, needed to be revised to become protagonists of this scenario. They had to deal with professional, institutional, educational conversations, but also with those from the personal and affective context.

In this sense, *Artificial Stupidity* is the result of research in art and technology that, through a critical look and listen, reflects upon this type of technological mediation of social processes. The project does not place technology and the social process as separate elements but seeks to understand them as parts and actors of the same network.

Moreover, we reinforce that *Artificial Stupidity* is not a scientific experiment, but an artistic one. It is developed within an artistic methodology, in which dubiousness can be seen as an aesthetic potency. Digital and scientific systems hardly support this characteristic since they have precision as a paramount value. It is precisely in this confrontation that the work exercises its critical content. How can the readings of these systems be understood when they leave the domain of a controlled, laboratory environment, to act in a social environment, or as better put by Latour (2008), of unforeseen associations? From this analysis, we conclude that it is important to take into account the context of the associations that form the network in which we are operating. When doing so, the exercise of critical reflection on the black boxes we use is especially necessary.

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1 The terms are neologisms originating from the words window and pan, respectively, in Portuguese. They refer to a type of protest in which the population bangs pans to make noise from their windows, in an action against the government.

2 Project team: Alline Alves Nakamura, Ana Paula Leal, Bruno Seravali Moreschi, Giselle Beiguelman (coordination), Helena Cavalheiro, Iago Santos, Ícaro de Abreu, Laura Salerno, Livia Debbane, Luciana Moherdaui, Marcos Assis Piffer, Maria Claudia Levy, Matheus da Rocha Montanari, Paula Monroy, Sandra Kaffka, and Vinicius Santos Almeida.

3 Available at: https://bim.com.ar/mirarnos-a-los-ojos/artists?id=41. Accessed 5 Nov. 2020.

4 Available at: http://janelasdesobedientes.art.br/index.html. Accessed 5 Nov. 2020.