

Editorial: “Operativism: Labor, Automation, Agitation”

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Responding to the intensification of “military operations” in Ukraine, Gaza, and Iran, this special issue of *e-flux journal* advocates for a return to a materialist genealogy of “operativism”—a concept that spans labor politics and scientific management throughout the twentieth century, from the Soviet avant-gardes to postwar cybernetics to modern warfare and the multiple interpretations of Harun Farocki’s “operational images.” “Operations” have been theorized primarily within the technological register of power, often obscuring other genealogies and readings that see operations as falling within the logic of cooperation in labor and social relations. While debates on the “operative ontologies” of media have foregrounded technical configurations, this issue turns to the “social machine” and the organization of labor that underwrite operations. Elaborating on Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson’s idea of “the operations of capital” and against the mute compulsions of capital today, we propose “operativism” as the other side of its technical and tactical operations.

In the late 1960s, in response to the Vietnam War, Farocki redefined “operativism” as a mode of political agitation, emphasizing its significance for class strategy and calling for a social repurposing of film technology to disrupt the production circuits sustaining the war and capital alike. In his 1969 text in this issue, “to scientize agitation and politicize science,” he reactivates the materialist genealogy of operativism, referring to the introduction of the idea by Sergei Tretyakov and the legacy of Walter Benjamin’s essay “The Author as Producer.” As a reporter and a standing member of a collective farm in the North Caucasus, the Soviet writer and playwright Tretyakov mobilized operativism in order to de-professionalize the conventional writer, emphasizing their organizational role within the farm’s day-to-day operations. Neither Benjamin nor Farocki, however, registered the degree to which Tretyakov’s aesthetics participated in the extractivist dynamic of collectivization under Stalin’s rule.

Alla Vronskaya traces the material history of forced collectivization, arguing that Tretyakov’s project transformed factography (the avant-garde rejection of traditional art in favor of the documentation of “facts” through new media such as photography and film) into an aesthetic instrument of planning—a fetish of the plan that concealed the violence of the command economy.

A cognate genealogy of operation runs through the work of Aleksei Gastev, an anarchist, worker, poet, and theorist of social engineering who founded the Central Institute of Labor in

Moscow in 1920. Drawing on Marx's *Capital*, Gastev and his colleague Evgenii Petrov theorized the operation as a unit of labor coordinating machines and bodily techniques within a social machine of production. In this issue, Devin Fore and Aleksandra Selivanova situate Gastev's legacy between the avant-garde arts and the ambivalences of "Soviet Taylorism." Fore argues that Gastev developed an operative, nonrepresentational language of command and control that anticipated cybernetics while promising the empowerment of the working class.

Olexii Kuchanskyi and Elena Vogman conceptualize contemporary war as a metabolic system in which colonial destruction and investment capital form an operational chain linking military, economic, and media processes. Tracing a genealogy from Soviet operativism to Farocki's "operative film," they argue that images can intervene in these circuits by disrupting the social relations and divisions of labor that organize the production of destruction.

Tom Holert argues that Farocki's concept of operational images emerges from a long-standing effort to recover the "work" of images beneath representation, information, and mythologizing visibility, linking it to Barthes, Brechtian formalism, and the Soviet operativist tradition. At the same time, he argues that Farocki's engagement with operational images remains deeply ambivalent: while they promise a nonrepresentational, politically effective image practice, they are also bound up with military vision, exclusion, and dehumanizing regimes of control that demand critical scrutiny.

Revisiting Benjamin's theory of art's aura, Kalindi Vora and Neda Atanasoski reveal the ideological superstructure of contemporary AI. AI is not simply a material technique of automation. Rather, AI operates through what they define as AURA—Aesthetic, Ubiquitous, Regimented Automation—a procedure that captures affect, style, and intimacy while transforming them into extractable, operational resources that sustain monopoly capitalism. AI aestheticizes and normalizes surveillance, labor discipline, and social control. Against this current regime the authors also point to alternative strategies of feminist spectral aesthetics to envision non-extractive, collective modes of algorithmic relation.

To return to operativism and to the legacy of historical avant-gardes today is to reclaim the space and logic of operations, as sites of collective intelligence, struggle, and intervention.

Category

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