PROJECT

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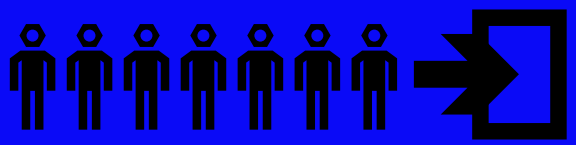
LABOUR



Živa Kleindienst
Tadej Vindiš
Mateja Visenjak

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Sanela Jahić
Nicola Arthen
Samantha Penn

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Dorijan Šiško

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The “project.labour” project/ exhibition is a multi-layered international artistic and curatorial exchange. Through cross-disciplinary dialogue, the participating artists and curators negotiate the relationship between new and historic, localised and international evolutions of manufacturing, automation and distribution processes, looking at these processes as cultural formations. The curatorial focus on exchange synthesises three research projects which, from different positions, explore the significance of the relation between humans and machines and consequential reconfigurations of the notion of labour.

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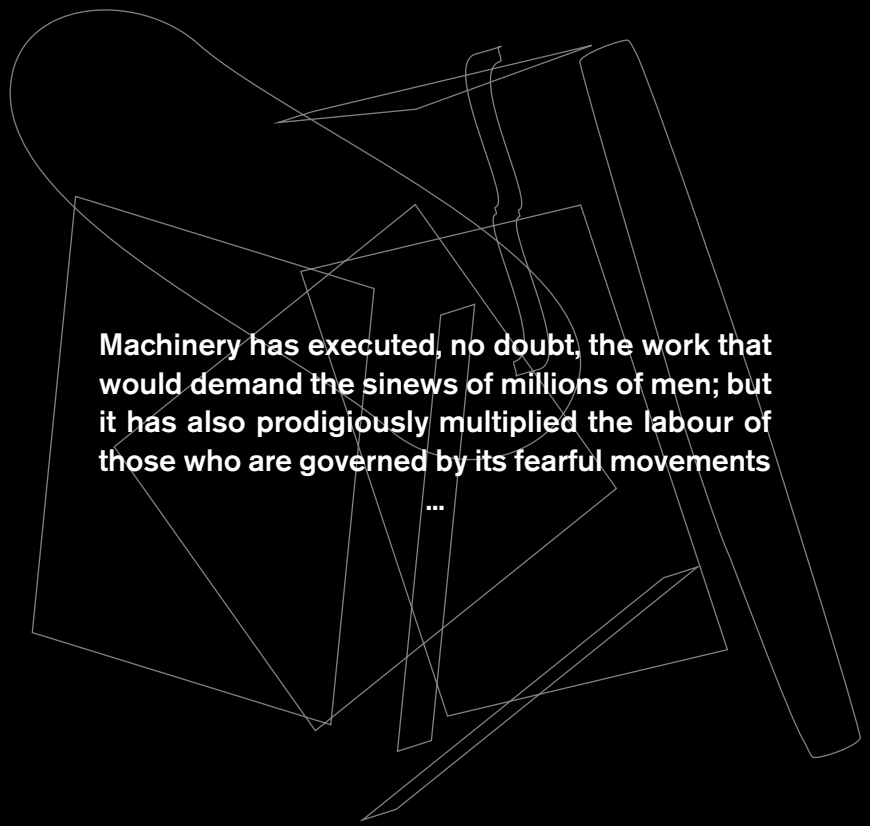

Machinery has executed, no doubt, the work that would demand the sinews of millions of men; but it has also prodigiously multiplied the labour of those who are governed by its fearful movements ...

Marx

➔➔➔ The project is a heterogeneous cultural cluster generated by the collision of different historical trajectories, knowledge and various localities. The relations between humans and machines are tackled in correspondence with automation – within and beyond industrial production – positioned in the multifaceted critique of late-capitalism, in which we, as cultural workers, are also embedded. Knowledge as an asset produces ideas, methods and processes which generate the basis of rationalisation of modes of production, bodies and minds. These rationalisations are implicated in, and produce, the power relations between worker, machine and capital; their formation opens the political dimension of the possibility for antagonism to emerge. The collective and personal space is negotiated in conjunction with mechanical objects – either in the factory or as a product from production line. What is necessary is to rethink the level of trust invested in automated machines and to look at said machines differently – to examine the complexity of the chain of production and the machine being dismantled in order to unveil the marginal structures underneath. What resonates is a gap between once positive aspirations towards technological progress and the contemporary anxieties induced and intensified by drive for profit.
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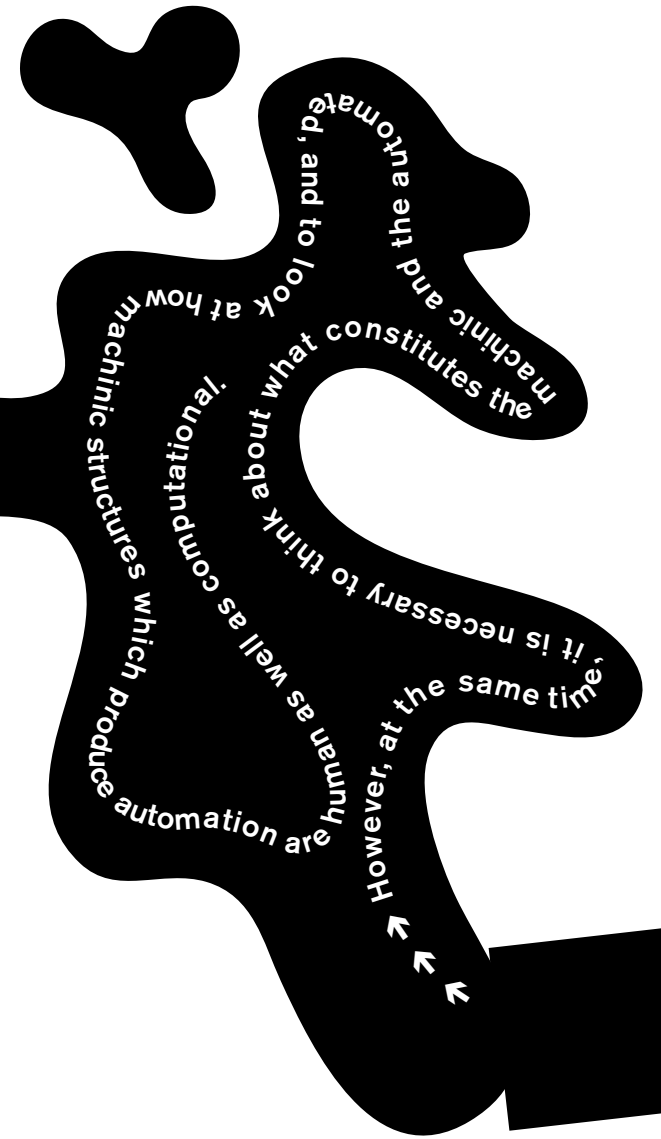
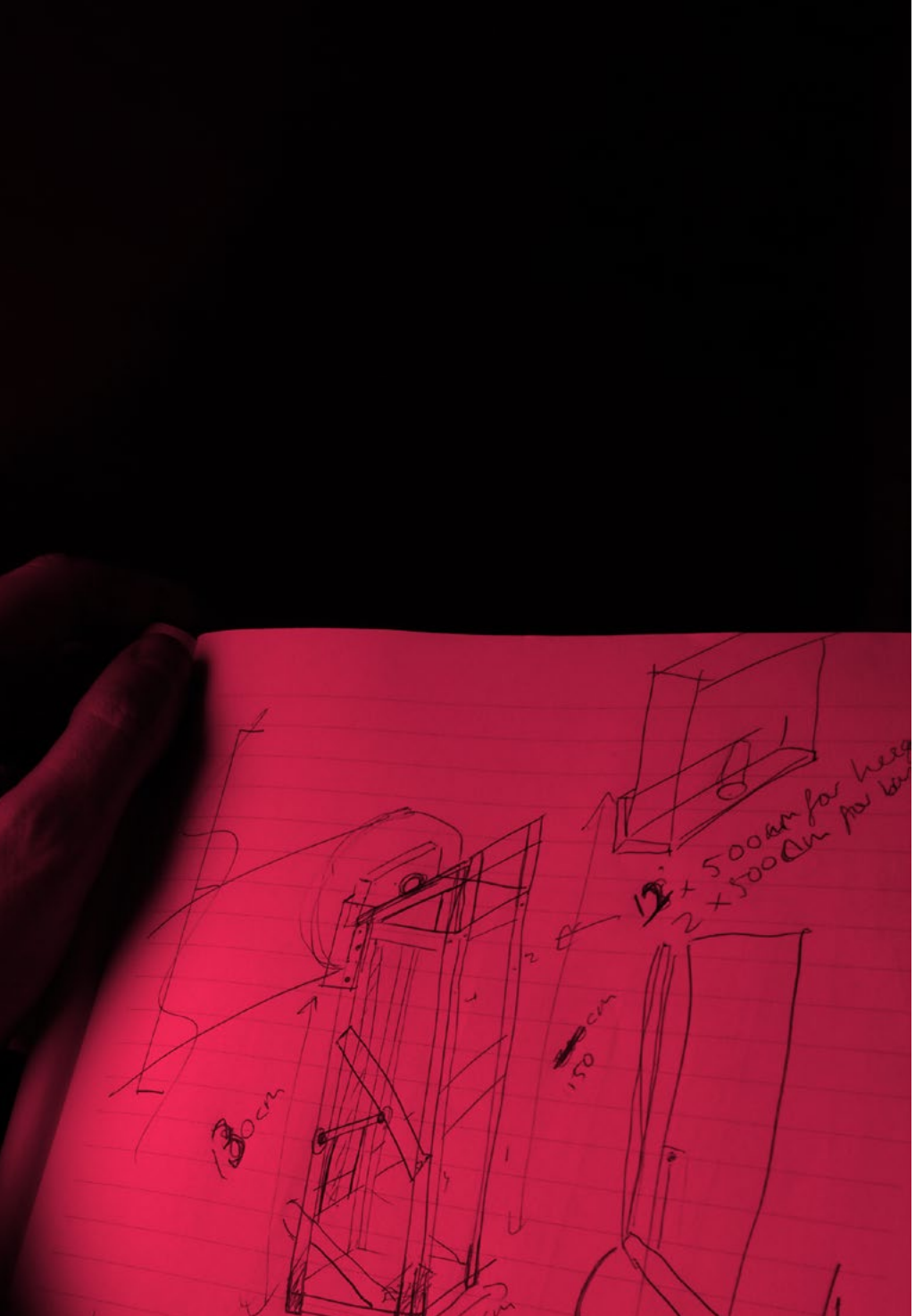


SAMANTHA

For my project in 2015-16 I visited, multiple times, a factory where they make the secure paper in bank notes. I used my knowledge of working in lots of social situations to get to know everyone in quite an intimate way - I basically tried to listen to, really get to know, and be interested in the people and their workplace. I tried to build a picture of the culture of the specific workplace by noting down the arrangements of time, space, the movements of people and machines. This whole process involved thinking through 'automation in action' in a live industrial context - thinking about how power is materialised through strategies and structures, and thinking about the moment something can be called 'automated'.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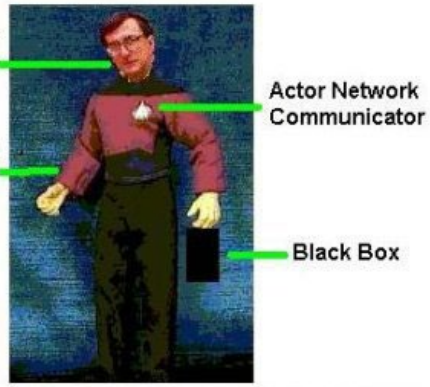
Sanela Jahić, Samantha Penn and Nicola Arthen's works seek to rethink automation, approaching it from different entry points. The projects are based on extensive in situ research of industrial structures, underpinned by the artists' situated knowledge. They observe and intervene in the relation between humans (workers, owners, users, viewers, co-workers) and machines; the feelings evoked, the interplay of power relations, the spatial negotiations and the choreography of mechanised movements. Moreover, they observe the consequences of industrialisation and automation through the (simultaneous) de-and-reformation of industrial processes. The unavoidable technological entropy caused by this mutation implicates and changes not only the material and logistical functioning of industry, but also the emergence of new sociocultural norms – the industrial change, which has political and ontological implications. But in the end, the active mutation of industry becomes as well about the apparent absurdity of the machines, which iterate complex structures generated by humans over millennia and which cannot be adequately conceptualised or pinned down. They demand adaptation to their logics – to the rigidity of systems which promise efficiency, however, not only as a cultural shift, but as transformation of culture as such (and its potential consequences).

Bruno Latour Action Figure

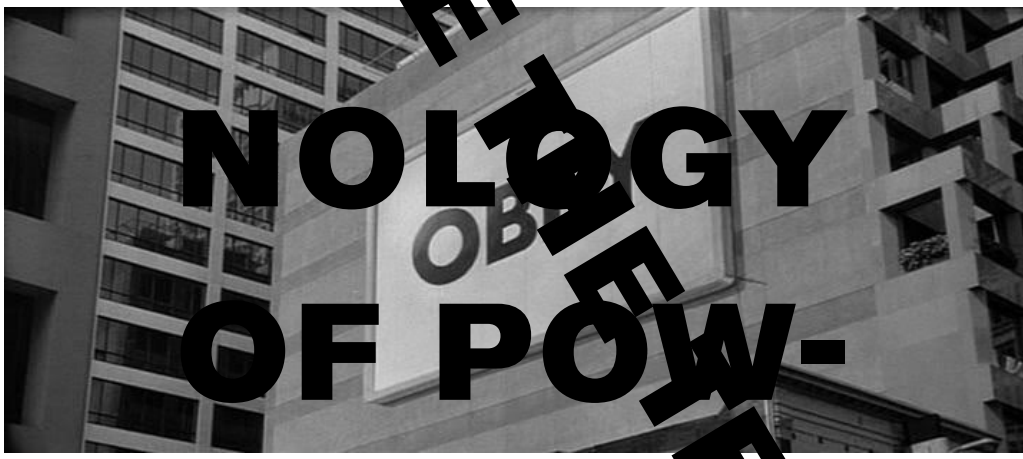


Each action figure comes complete with Nature, Society and numerous hybrids. Get yours now while they last.

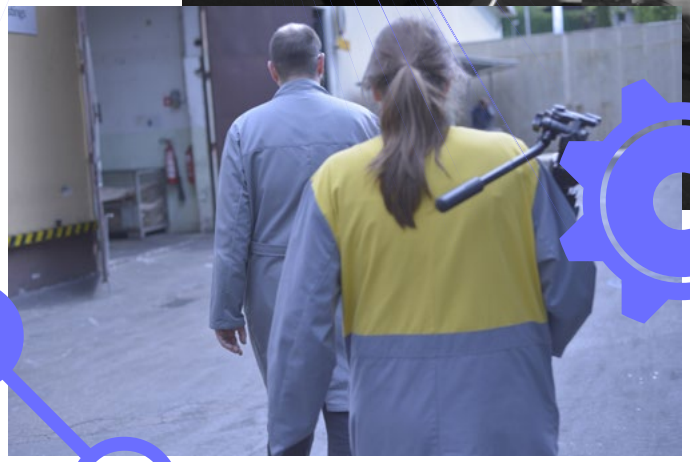
As Andrew Pickering in his book The Cybernetic Brain sums up Bruno Latour's schematic, but insightful story of modernity, "modernity is coextensive with a certain dualism of people and things; that key features of the modern West can be traced back to dichotomous patterns of thought which are now institutionalized in our schools and universities. The natural sciences speak of a world of things (such as chemical elements and quarks) from which people are absent, while the social sciences speak of a distinctly human realm in which objects, if not entirely absent, are at least marginalized (one speaks of the "meaning" of "quarks" rather than quarks in themselves). Our key institutions for the production and transmission of knowledge thus stage for us a dualist ontology: they teach us how to think of the world that way, and also provide us with the resources for acting as if the world were that way" (Pickering 2010: 18).

The contemporary condition demands to rethink the formation of subjectivity; its multiplicity and mediation emerging from the technological reconfiguration of economic and cultural space. The means of production – of goods and services, of value, of power – have changed enormously from the beginning of 20th Century. The informational revolution has led to the formation of a global computational infrastructure inducing capitalism

with and through flexibility, decentralisation and networking. The structures of temporality and contingency, which progressively manage, manipulate and dictate the production and distribution processes of contemporary global economies by consuming the world's resources through virtual spaces of neoliberalist financial automation. The post-industrial economy in the rise of network society builds a utopian vision of inevitable social tranquillity, which can be achieved with full mechanical automation, but in doing so denies the line of continuity which binds the present to the past. The progression towards such a vision "cannot be understood without the interaction between these two relatively autonomous trends: development of new information technologies, and the old society's attempt to retool itself by using the power of technology to serve the technology of power" (Castells 1996: 52). It therefore might be too crude to make a solid distinction between industrial and post-industrial economy, and more accurate, to describe the technological enhancements of capitalism as a continuation of industrial modes which continuously serve power (Cox, Krysa 2005: 9).

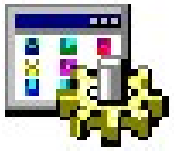


SERVE THE TECHNOLOGY OF POWER



I'd place my cultural agency somewhere within research and social activism. And yes, for sure, working in this way causes you to look at your own context from various angles. I very much appreciate these learning curves, because in a way it steers one away from being at a standstill. Thus, working with factories directly has taught me a lot. When I started constructing machines partly in collaboration with companies and specialists, I learnt – it now seems fairly obvious actually – that the machine I wanted to build was completely non-functional in relation to the logic of production process or operations of industrial machines, it was viewed as illogical in comparison to the purpose of machines in manufacturing plants. This alone already raised questions and interesting conversations with people who came from different fields to work on a project together.

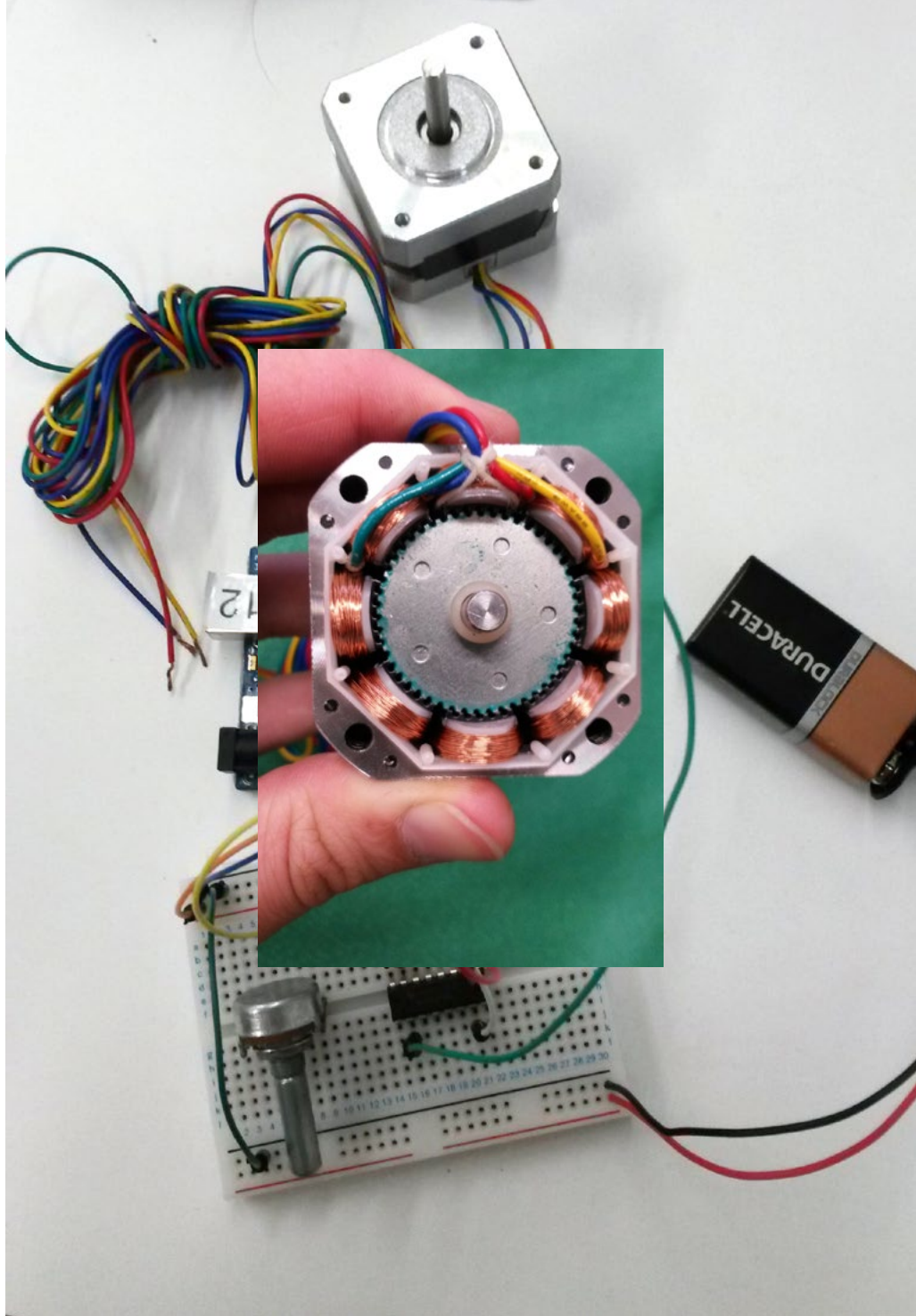
The company normally strives to present its technology in the absolute perfect form and function of what it can achieve, while I don't see it as the necessity and welcome the mistakes as signs of human factor. In addition, four years ago I began filming in local manufacturing plants. The videos, which include interviews and conversations, attempt to dissect the background of industrial production nowadays through the mash of dialogues stretched between the following poles: machine, worker, owner, labour and c/Capital. Like Samantha mentioned, this process involves getting to know everyone first, explaining your motivation and the purpose of the work you want to make and most important, forming a level of trust as the foundation for one's participation. I'm well aware that each cut I make in the editing process is an opportunity for manipulation. To that end, I try to disclose a story about the intertwinement of technology, labour, capitalist production relations and subjectivity in videos too, but without blatant sentimentality, patronizing or portrayal of someone as the victim. The issues of increasing automation and the value of labour are complex. There seems to be a distant potential for a positive spin here, one which would require a social thought and political movement that directs the technological progress away from the interests of capitalism and salaried work. One more thing I learnt: I was allowed to enter the factories with the permission of the owner and management who, in the most extreme cases, behaved not only as owners of property, processes and machines, but of people employed there as well.



The chronocyclegraph of the robot's motion during work made according to Gilbreth's method

The optimism of the Enlightenment reformulated technical objects as extension of the human corpus while deriving from nature – not of the divine, but technology as extension of nature, which allows the utilisation of its potential; leading to the emergence of human industry. The concept of nature as mechanical and, as such, technology as a natural continuation of evolution, proposes an image of resource totality. However, such an image requires that the world is understood solely through its material construction scientifically broken down to the empirical deadlock, which leads to disenchantment of the world build – to demystification of the humanity and/or individual humans seen or perceived as radiant centre of action; its disappointment and its cynicism, deriving from "the belief that human reason separated from nature can produce objective knowledge about the latter" (Wilson 1987: 60).

Acknowledging this disappointment opens routes for questioning and critically assessing given relationships; relationships between employees, management and machines. The same act of acknowledgement is also a point of potential subversiveness, however, to grasp the latter it is important to admit the power and discipline. The notion of discipline may be identified neither with an institution nor with an apparatus.



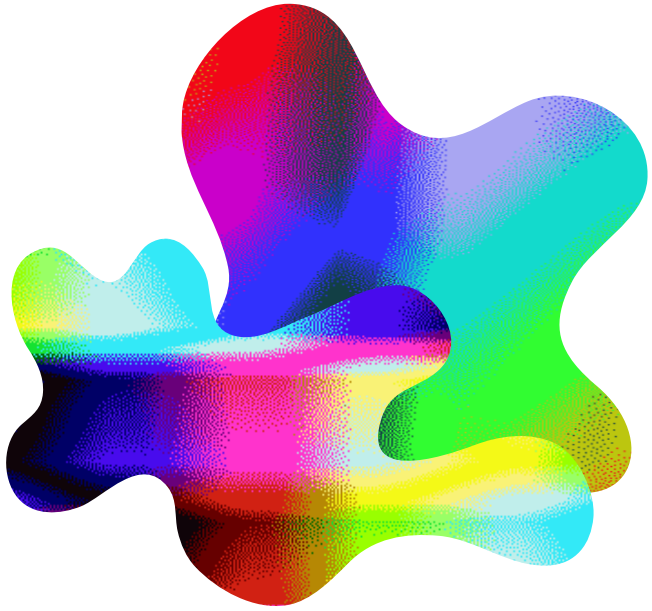
It is conceptualised as a type of power composed of a set of instruments, procedures and techniques; never monolithic, but rather dispersed and circulated. For this reason, Foucault argues that 'there is no Power, but power relationships which are being born incessantly as both effect and condition of other processes'. Discourses and disciplinary practices are derivative and formative of power relationships, entwined in social formations and exercised as points of positioning the relations of dominance and subjugation (Foucault 1975: 215).

Up to the present time labouring subject is constituted through disciplinary power, through the relationship between discursive system and disciplinary mechanisms of power, which are mediated to labour workers in form of institutional values, timetables, organisation of space and mechanization. Additionally, the forms mentioned are not only inherent to labour process, but are correspondingly used as a tool of inscription of forms of power on the body and psyche of individuals, in other words, “forms of administration, governmentalization and regulation pertain to the objectivized subject” (Sokolsky 1992: 115).

Changing the way a workplace runs is not a simple takeover but a series of experiments with materials and processes – when a new automation process is introduced to a workplace, people in that workplace will be watching the new development closely but for different reasons. Some will be interested in speeding up and scaling up existing processes, others will be interested in redistributing existing processes, others will be interested in how quickly they can learn the new process and forget about it so they can get on with their lives undisturbed, others will be interested in challenging the new process. The interesting thing is that none of these people will know what impact the introduction of

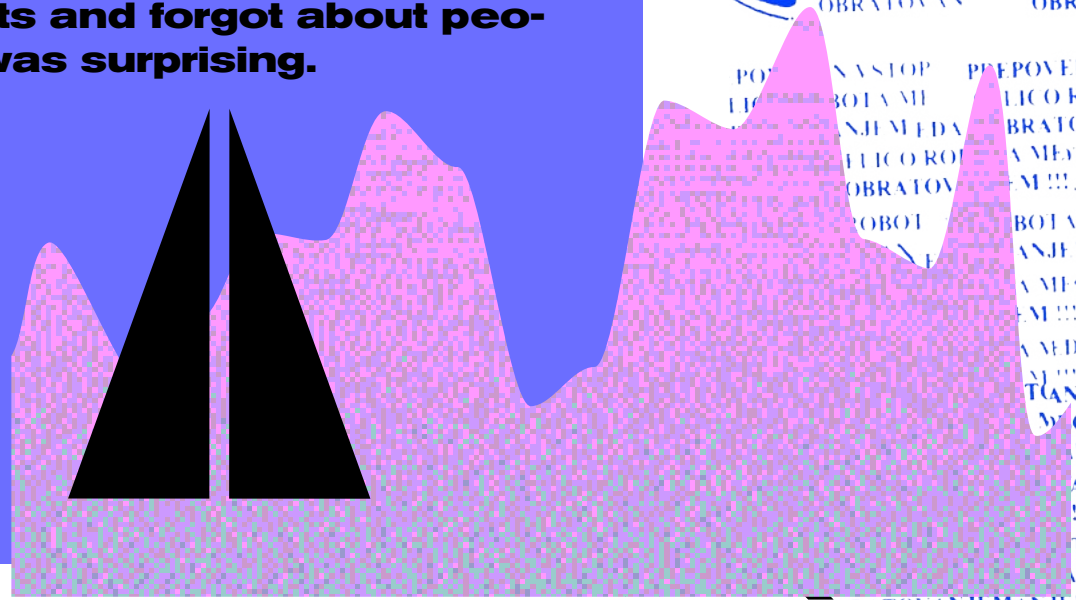
SAMANTHA

The application of power and its influence on the labouring subject has been identified in perspectives of normalizing judgement, hierarchical observation and their combination in examination. Normalizing in the form of so called quality circles, characteristic for industrial period, is replaced with a variety of 'consent games'. The latter work in order to gain the commitment and loyalty of the workers as they engage in the production process. In this sense workers depend more on managers' skills than on bureaucratic regulations, likewise more on the call to volunteerism than on the appeal of authority. “The trick is to make workers feel that their ideas count and their originality is valued while disguising the expansion of managerial prerogatives into the manipulative area of pop psychology” (Greiner 1988, 131). Producing one’s own value through arrangement of personal characteristics and disregarding generalised rationalisations can be distinguished as a new form of worker self-regulation, replacing the position of industrial worker self-management with worker self-production. Paradoxically, the debureaucratization of control is also used to implement capitalist normalization through computational totality, which is currently configured to work in favour of profit. Therefore, alongside control over physical movements, disciplinary power enters the realm of human interaction and consciousness (Sokolsky 1992: 120).



Modes of information production have changed along with the invention and dissemination of computerized manipulation. This change encompasses and shapes the expansion of the scope of surveillance throughout the entire workplace. The increased degree of visibility of the interactions of working people led to a conceptual and practical move away from understanding workplaces as hierarchical, and altered the whole process of examination of workers at the same time. “Computers allow [us] to retrieve information on production operations as they happen 24 hours per day. This enables them to do minute and precise study analyses of individual workers and to do comparative evaluations of different shifts or even geographically dispersed plants” (Poster 1984: 84). Data available to the management constitute the terrain for managerial norms of performance evaluation fold into surveillance apparatus, which nevertheless plays a crucial role in constituting the labouring subject. Moreover, the managements are surveilled and controlled themselves by privately owned software companies and by other management teams who share data and mimic each other’s management structures. Political technology of the body does not consist only of controlling human rhythm and motions through automation's combination of numerical control and time-body management of robotization, but on another level, it consists of hegemonic control being intertwined with human-robot relations ideology. Automation, robotizations and mechanisation are imposed as a threat to human input and the labouring subject – and with it the human – is interpellated as a replaceable part of labouring process. Human work can be subject to machine pacing in a new way – making people and robots interchangeable. “Only the managerially defined work rhythm is embedded in the machinery and, in turn, in the bodies of the workers on the line, through a 'microphysics of power'” (Comay 1986: 135).

As a side note, I remember a conversation I had with a guy, who programmes the movements of robots in the local automotive industry during one of my visits there. He talked about robots suffering in high temperatures, being overburdened, poorly handled and maintained. I then asked him about people who work there in the same conditions. „People?“ he repeated, taken aback. The way he humanized the robots and forgot about people was surprising.

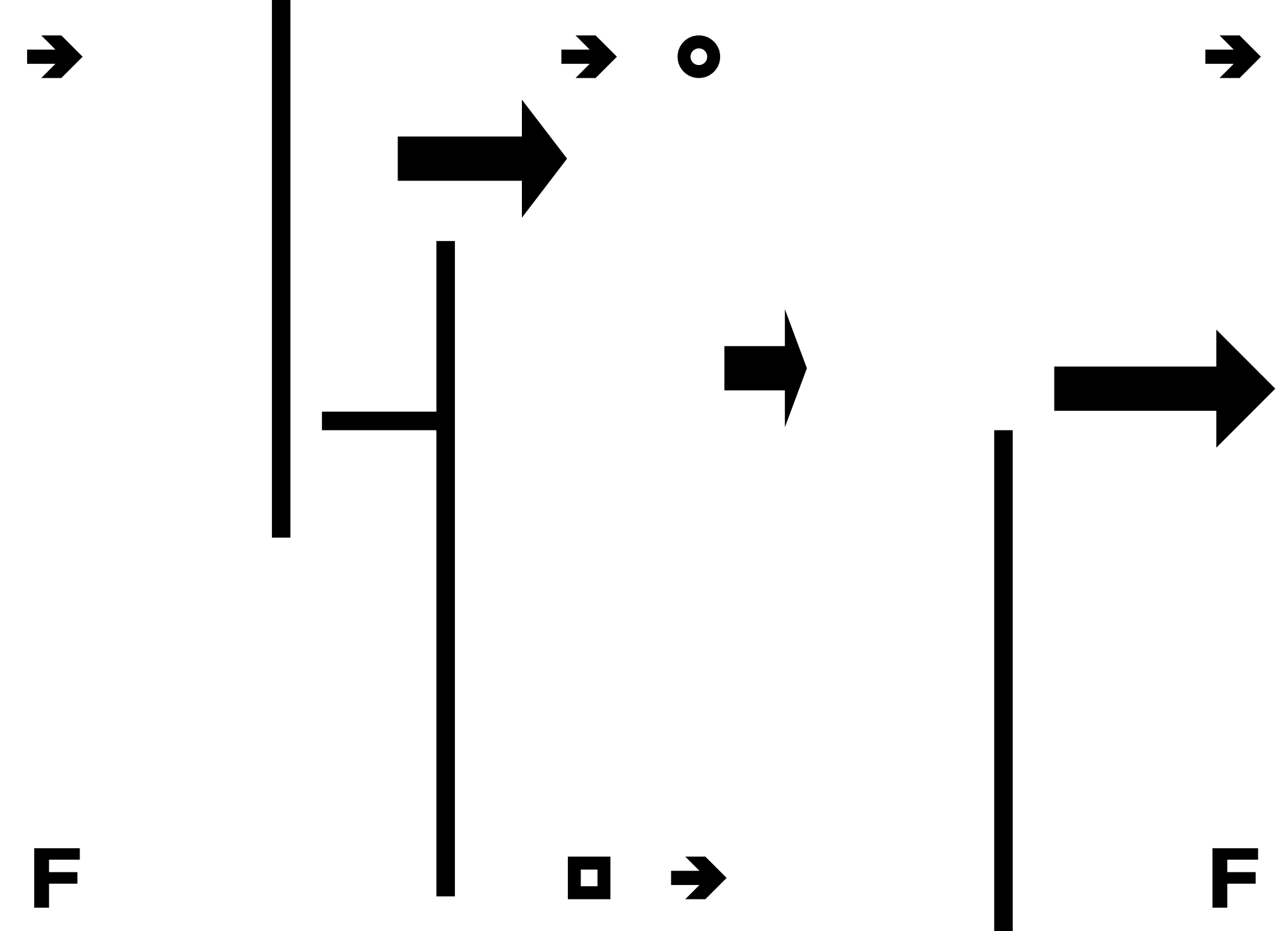


NICOLA

I think an element that I find to be a major characteristic in the comfort of assembly line work is its repetition as a loop. This might sound unlikely, maybe in parts controversial to state. For sure, I can recall the painful feeling of a work that seems never ending and, worse, always going to be the same. And the difference when I worked at the assembly line was that in contrast to long-term employees being that I know it will end after eight weeks max. This relation to it was usually present, when seeing it in a longer duration (of days or weeks). But concentrated on the moment of work itself, putting the same parts in the same place with the same movement, can create some kind of joy as well and it was essential to why I have returned to do this kind of work almost every year. This is probably an example of the machinic in the human.

SAMANTHA

If you really look at a workplace, watch it for a period of time (even your own workplace) you see that humans work with, are conditioned by, and are intimate with machines all the time. People constantly adapt the processes of machines in order to socialise with other people, with machines, all the while influencing the mode of communication. When a shift worker optimises a spreadsheet to make a production process more efficient, they are developing a context specific response to the machinations of their surroundings and communicating that response, that idea of efficiency, to other workers, other shifts. When someone writes their name on their food in the fridge they are communicating through the use of systems, opening a communication channel. Our interactions with processes in the workplace are constantly experimental. When the workplace is framed as a cybernetic system, the labouring subject itself is redefined, and the worker is reframed as a powerful agent with intimate knowledge of the system they work with. With this detailed knowledge the working person ably communicates with systems, generates responses to systems, all the time, all the time in collaboration with machines.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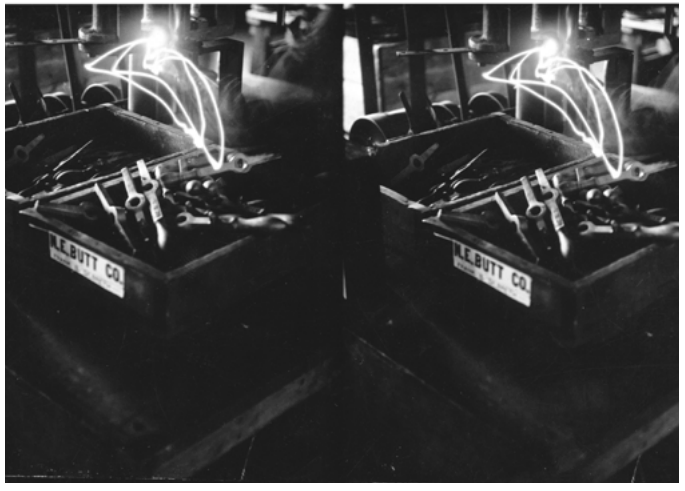
However closely technological transformation of labour is historically tied to the formation of labouring subject, “the presence of media in our lives, and the abstract social relations that they bear, are more diffuse and extensive than is usually imagined. Moreover, increasingly more diverse and numerous things, habits, and roles are becoming media or are being activated as mediation.” (Fuller, Goffey 2012: 1) The labouring subject, in an environment of constantly activating and reacting media, must undergo constant change. As such, the labouring subject – and any concept of the labouring subject which we might hope to discuss – is in itself unstable.

Observing machinic structure lying underneath the contemporary condition reveals the scale of machine’s agency within the political, social and cultural space. The materiality of information – of mechanical action – does not lie solely in the hardware, nor as projections on our computer screens or the objects produced through the interaction with the machines, but rather permeates all in the process of communicational transmission of networked informational processing. From entropy and chaos structures crystallise; constantly transitioning material discourses which direct and conduct the “automation in action”, and which rather than leading to something tangible, reveals their non-place. The mediation of society and culture happens in constant conjunction with the machines and with each other – human-computer hybrids who occupy the space of the indefinite and of the unresolved. Rather than monumentality, we are faced with constant immateriality which is at the same time constant materiality – a permanent state of active process, appropriation and reproduction through multi-directional and entangled logics of automated processing. The mediation and temporality of the constant "now" – the moment we are currently, and never again, in – a non-place that cannot stabilise – is a conduit between the machines and sentient beings who are made different as they interact with these entangled logics and processes.



Source: Kheel Center for Labor-Management Documentation and Archives

In a computationally organised society, it's too simple to describe interactions in workplaces in terms of subject/object, worker/manager, human/machine; whether thinking about general construction of subjectivity or the politics of a particular workplace, applying fixed descriptions to interacting agents seems inept when there are so many agents acting on so many scales. It doesn't seem enough, for example, to describe a person at work as a 'labouring subject'. This makes the power which resides in workplaces invisible by preceding any conversations about workers with the assertion that the worker is dominated and controlled. Due to the humanist associations tied to the concepts of labour and the subject, using such terms also immediately locates all the power, lack of power, and responsibility for change, with the human; an overly reduced description in the context of the information society.

END OF TEXT

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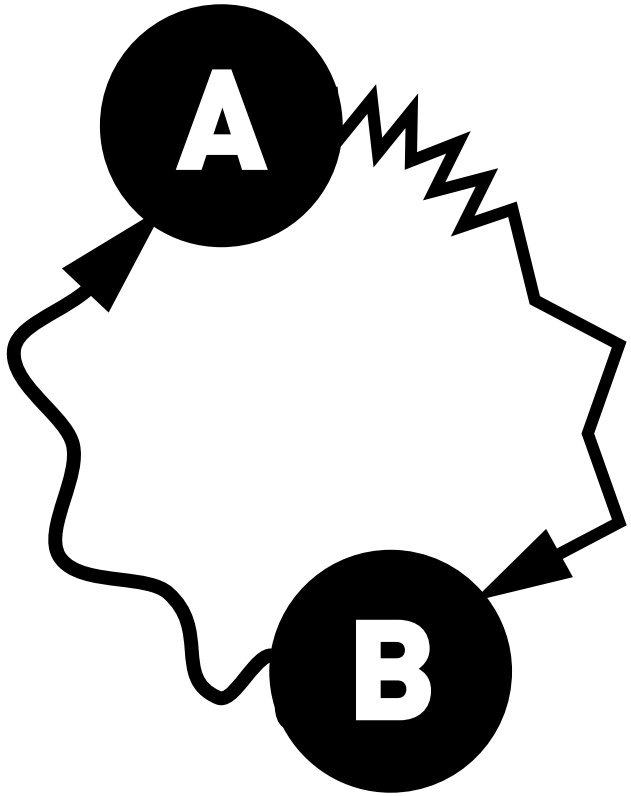
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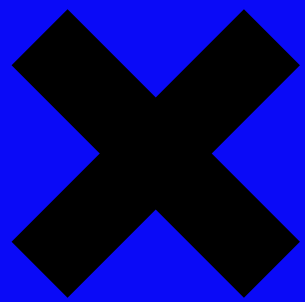

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