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Virtual Suicide as Decisive Political Act

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Abstract

The reappraisal of interventionist responses is necessarily ongoing, not least in the context of how social media have changed the face of the political process and the ways in which subjectivity is captured. The tactics of dissent have changed too. For instance, *Seppukoo* (2009), a recent hack of Facebook by Les Liens Invisibles, provided an example where users were able to commit virtual suicide in a ritualistic removal of their virtual identity. Virtual suicide stands as the stubborn refusal to operate under intolerable conditions of service and affirms the possibility of creative autonomy over work and life.

Preface

“Suicide is the decisive political act of our times”, says Franco Berardi; it typifies the communicative action of the arts and the pathology of the psycho-social system (2009, p. 55). Indeed, there appear to be ever more examples that would support Berardi’s view and reveal the act of suicide as symptomatic of more general and paranoid aspects of contemporary culture.

What happened in New York on 9/11 serves an obvious backdrop for such statements: think of Karlheinz Stockhausen’s infamous remarks describing it as “the greatest work of art ever” and Slavoj Žižek’s observation that “America got what it fantasized about” (as if following the script of a Hollywood disaster movie) (2001). That the event has been endlessly *remediated* leads Richard Grusin to describe a perceptible shift in cultural logic from mediating past forms to *premediating* future events and possibilities (2010). His argument is that after 9/11 (and Abu Ghraib too), premediation attempts to remediate the future before it settles into the present, and hence serves to produce a “consensual hallucination” such that we imagine future scenarios and death threats before they happen. Indeed, it represents a pre-emptive strike on the cultural imagination. For Berardi too, the key political problem is identified with mechanisms of control over the imaginary (2009).

So, what are the possibilities for the radical imagination when the homogenizing effects of neo-liberalism have become the dominant force? If Francis Fukuyama’s pronouncement of the ‘end of history’ can be considered hallucinatory and preemptive, then it also indicates something about the post-political times in which we live where a preemptive strike on your own life can operate as effective critique of a repressive regime. In this sense, all suicide attempts can be considered to be preemptive attacks and symptoms of wider malaise about the possibilities of effective action. Correspondingly, the biopolitical regime of securitisation requires that technologies be based on affective states of anticipation and connectivity; what Grusin refers to

as ‘commodified premediation technologies’ (2010, p. 181).

An example of this tendency is the Iraqi/American artist Wafaa Bilal’s project *The Night of Bush Capturing: A Virtual Jihadi* (2008), a computer game in which he casts himself as a suicide bomber (becoming what Paolo Pedercini neatly refers to as a “First-Person Terrorist”). The game results from a hack of *Quest for Saddam* (released in 2003, as a sequel to *Quest for Al Qaeda*) in which players try to kill Saddam Hussein, into *The Night of Bush Capturing*, an online version allegedly by Al Qaeda, in which players try to kill George W. Bush. Bilal’s further modification *Virtual Jihadi* rejects both versions – both the extreme fantasies of islamophobia and islamophilia alike – by placing his own body in the frame and by extension the player’s body too. As Bilal explains:

“What better way to reflect what Iraqis are going through than a personal tragedy, casting myself as a suicide bomber after the killing of my brother. I represent so many Iraqis who find themselves vulnerable to a terrorist organization like Al Qaeda taking over their homeland. They either become violent because of the pressure or they are forced to join these organizations out of fear or they join because of their outrage at what the U.S. is doing to their homeland.” (in Holmes 2008)



Fig 1: *Virtual Jihadi*

The contradictions are embodied in the game, and according to Brian Holmes the inconsistencies of free speech are revealed in its reception – pointing to the cancellation of its exhibition at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, in the U.S.. He contrasts the threat to freedom of speech of the censorship act with the symbolic speech act of the game. Indeed, which is the more terroristic?

With no longer a centre of power to be found, or established opposition as such (with the end of the cold war), it is clear that the enemy is distributed across complex networks not simply in the evil caricatures of Saddam or Bush (and, Al Qaeda is a good example of a disembodied network). But at the same time, the concept of the political is arguably still activated by the identification of the friend and enemy grouping. Drawing on Carl Schmitt's notion of enmity (in *The Concept of the Political*, of 1927) and his critique of liberalism in general, the problem is cast that a consensus-based model fails to acknowledge that the political is necessarily antagonistic. Many commentators (such as Chantal Mouffe) continue to stress the unavoidability of antagonism rather than neo-liberal consensus, which in the end turns out to be a new and subtle form of control.

In this connection, there has been much attention to Michel Foucault's lectures on governmentality delivered between 1982-3 (2010), to draw out the distinction between early liberalism and contemporary neoliberalism. He explains that neoliberalism has replaced the regulatory function of the state in relation to the market (liberalism) with the market itself (neoliberalism). Correspondingly, the human subject is defined in different terms, as reacting to the market rather than the limits of government. This characterises the *biopolitical* dimension of governance, what Foucault calls governmentality (2010), as it becomes enmeshed with the construction of certain types of subjectivity in line with free market logic. In the regimes of governmentality, control is exerted on life itself, and thereby one extreme method of refusing its logic is its symbolic ending.

This essay continues this line of thinking through the concept of virtual suicide, introducing numerous examples of the symbolic death of a life half-lived. Is this the only viable response that remains in a situation where Western forms of democracy have exhausted themselves on ethical grounds, ever more evidenced in human rights abuses and illegal killings in illegal wars (evidenced through Wikileaks not least)? As Jodi Dean puts it, in *Democracy and Other Neoliberal Fantasies*, democracy can no longer be considered an answer to political problems but a symptom (2009). The examples introduced in this essay establish positions of ethical refusal on various levels but it remains in doubt whether they achieve the reverse engineering of governmentality (and the political resurrection this preempts). But the concern is to try to understand the ways in which virtual suicide might affirm autonomy over actual life. Under present conditions of preemption, this is perhaps a prophetic way to understand the possibilities for effective political action. Is this what makes virtual suicide so compelling?

Virtual Suicide

There is undoubted currency for the subject of virtual suicide in cultural production. Alongside the experience of virtual death and dying in commercial gameworlds like *World of Warcraft* (Klastrup 2008), there are many that involve first person narratives about suicide. For instance, one popular example is *Five Minutes to Kill (Yourself)* (2009), a free online flash game (also available for iPhone), in which the protagonist (Stan/you) has five minutes in which to kill him/yourself rather than go back to work. As the marketing material puts it: "Stan has five

minutes before another soul-snuffing office meeting and his only escape from professional obligation is sweet, chilly death. [...] You're Stan's only hope." The task is to explore the office space and find ingenious ways to hurt yourself – encountering a biohazard is one such opportunity to assist in the pursuit of death. Moreover, the *mise-en-scène* is violent but so too the symbolic violence of the capitalist workplace.



Fig 2: *Five Minutes to Kill (Yourself)*

Also in the realm of office politics, Olga Goriunova's *Suicide Letter Wizard for Microsoft Word* (2002) is a parody of Microsoft Word's function that preempts the user's intentions by offering help in the form of a Disney-like office assistant. The assistant (or wizard) is a programmed function that states, "It Looks Like You're Writing a Letter", in this case offering options for the stylistic preferences in writing a suicide note. The essay of the same name, "It Looks Like You're Writing a Letter" by Matthew Fuller (2003; first written to accompany the installation *A Song for Occupations*, at the Lux gallery, London, in 2000), makes clear how the user of the software is also installed into the system. This takes place more generally in parallel to how the "disappearance of the worker is best achieved by the direct subsumption of all their potentiality within the apparatus of work" (2003, p. 139). In the social factory, the value that is stolen no longer relates simply to labour power but to subjectivity too. In this sense, enforced labour is already a death sentence, and therefore its refusal might prove to be the ultimate act of defiance.

Furthermore, under these conditions and in recognition of network power, the usual recommendation of those developing oppositional tactics is to take advantage of the vulnerabilities in networks by exploiting power differentials that exist in the system. Such tactics draw on methods informed by network, information and media theory, and yet the effect of ‘tactical media’ activists is paradoxical, as Geert Lovink contends:

“Disruptive as their actions may often be, tactical media corroborate the temporal mode of post-Fordist capital: short-termism... This is why tactical media are treated with a kind of benign tolerance. [...] The ideal is to be little more than a temporary glitch, a brief instance of noise or interference. Tactical media set themselves up for exploitation in the same manner that ‘modders’ do in the game industry: both dispense with their knowledge of loop holes in the system for free. They point out the problem, and then run away. Capital is delighted, and thanks the tactical media outfit or nerd-modder for the home improvement.” (in Raley 2009, p. 28)

If effective tactics have migrated to the exercise of biopower (as this conference suggests), are the tactics of biopolitical activists similarly condemned? Is activism a spent force, in the sense that it repeats previous failed strategies to bring art and communicative action together? As Berardi puts it:

“Shouldn’t we set ourselves free from the repeated and failed attempt to act for the liberation of human energies from the rule of capital? Isn’t the path towards the autonomy of the social from economic and military mobilization only possible through a withdrawal into inactivity, silence, and passive sabotage?” (Berardi 2009, p. 126).

To begin to consider these questions, it is crucially important to recognise that it is partly through its very critique that capital is able to regenerate itself. Paradoxically, capital does not wish to destroy critique but tame it through subsumption, and in so doing expand its reach to the whole of life. This restructuring aspect is what the autonomists refer to as the ‘cycles of struggle’, in recognition that resistance also needs to transform itself in parallel. This is what Mario Tronti’s essay “The Strategy of Refusal”, of 1965, identified: that the logic of capital “seeks to use the worker’s antagonistic will-to-struggle as a motor for its own development” (1980, p. 29). The key issue is that capital does not develop through technological innovation per se, but from the inventive power of labour. This is why the withdrawal of labour remains an effective tactic. Unlike capital that needs labour, labour doesn’t require capital. Moreover, labour is potentially ‘autonomous’ and has the potential to use its creative energy differently.

If the current neoliberal regime is significantly underpinned by open social exchange, it continues to be the case that those who created it are logically the ones that can uncreate it – according to dialectical logic at least. Reversing the way power unfolds is arguably the only way change can happen, initially through ethical refusal and by establishing forms of resistance based on the structure of governmentality. The political task becomes one of reverse-engineering, or negating, significant elements to achieve different ends.

It is with an understanding of cycles of struggle that much media activism tries to adapt to the prevailing conditions, not least to respond to how communication technologies have changed

the political process and the ways in which dissent can be expressed. In the case of social media activism, this is plainly evident in new strategies of refusal (sometimes referred to as 'exodus', as an act of resistance towards constituted power, not as protest but defection). For instance, Moddr_lab's *Suicide Machine 2.0* is a good example that reflects the fashion for 'unfriending' from dominant social networking platforms (in its case, from Facebook, MySpace, twitter and LinkedIn). The website explains: "Liberate your newbie friends with a Web2.0 suicide! This machine lets you delete all your energy sucking social-networking profiles, kill your fake virtual friends, and completely do away with your Web2.0 alterego." The program logs in to the user's account, changes the profile picture into a pink noose, and the password (in case you are tempted to resurrect your profile), then proceeds to delete all friends, one by one.



Fig 3: Web 2.0 suicide machine

Echoing the argument for assisted suicide, Moddr_lab claims to protect the right to commit web 2.0 suicide. Whereas Facebook.com disagrees, citing the way the machine collects log-in credentials and scrapes Facebook pages, all violations of their terms of service (Needleman 2010). But their objection demonstrates duplicity, as it is well established now that Facebook holds onto personal information for their own shadowy purposes even after deletion of accounts (and 500 million friends provide a lot of data). The broader issue is that Facebook is following the logic of governmentality, in encouraging the free exchange of data so it can be mined to control the flow of people, commodities and production.

In practice, there appears to be a pragmatic trade-off between ethical principles and use value,

with users signing away rights to private platform owners in exchange for public sharing services often in full knowledge of the compromises this involves. On the other hand, the practice of ‘unfriending’ emerges as a growing tendency within network culture in recognition of privacy issues and in some cases the rejection of the underlying free market logic. In the case of “Facebook suicide” specifically, there are growing numbers of people that have deactivated their accounts and an emergence of the disturbing phenomena of Facebook suicide groups on the site, such as the Facebook Mass Suicide Club. On the one hand, there are harmless and relatively trivial artist projects like Cory Arcangel’s *Friendster suicide* (2005) where he simply announced his intention to delete his account performatively and in public, and on the other examples like Hong Kong Facebook ‘suicide’ group sharing suicide methods and urging members to kill themselves on the same day (2009). What might have started as a joke or misanthropy, ends with actual suicide attempts.

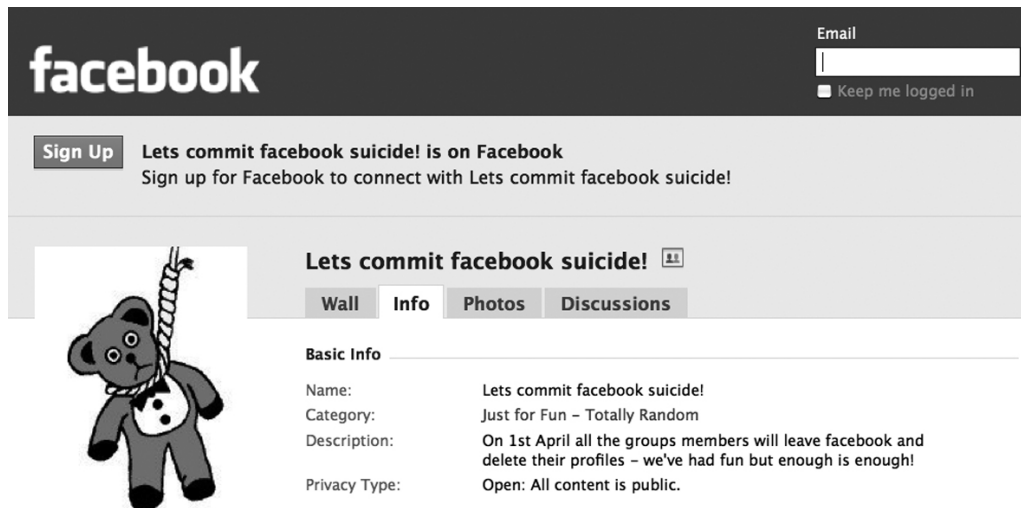


Fig 4: Let's commit Facebook suicide – just for fun

Facebook has become a favoured target for these reasons stated, and the emphasis on networks of ever more ‘friends’ demonstrates how social relations are developed in restrictive form that occludes the political dimension, inferring Schmitt’s concept of enmity mentioned earlier. The mythologised story of Facebook’s development, *The Social Network* (2010), seems to concur with this when stating in its publicity: “You don’t get to 500 million friends without making a few enemies”. A further example in this connection is a hack of Facebook by Les Liens Invisibles, entitled *Seppukoo* (2009), a platform for users to commit virtual suicide in a ritualistic removal of their virtual identity. Making their conceptual references clear, the project title is an explicit reference to the Japanese ritual suicide of *Seppuku* (literally *stomach-cutting*) and evokes the stubborn refusal to fall into the hands of the enemy – and the preference for autonomy even at the cost of one’s life. In such cases, suicide follows the Samurai code of honour (out of respect to the emperor, or perhaps disrespect to ‘empire’, in this case).

Furthermore, the project is inspired by *Seppuku!*, the ritual suicide that some members of the Luther Blissett Project committed in 1999, to declare the end of their multiple identities project (and the death of net.art as a temporary autonomous zone).

Significantly these actions represent a shift from the individual to collective action. Les Liens Invisibles (Guy McMusker) explains the motivation for the project:

“Thinking about suicide as a ‘viral’, we conceived it as a sort of involuntary form of strike. A massive accounts deactivation might potentially represent a denial of this supervalorization of one’s virtual body, hence put into action what the Tiqqun group calls a human strike. Each person missing implied the lack of all the person’s contacts as well. [The] Seppuko project was created to shift an individual action onto a collective stage through the mechanism of viral invitations.” (in Borelli 2010)

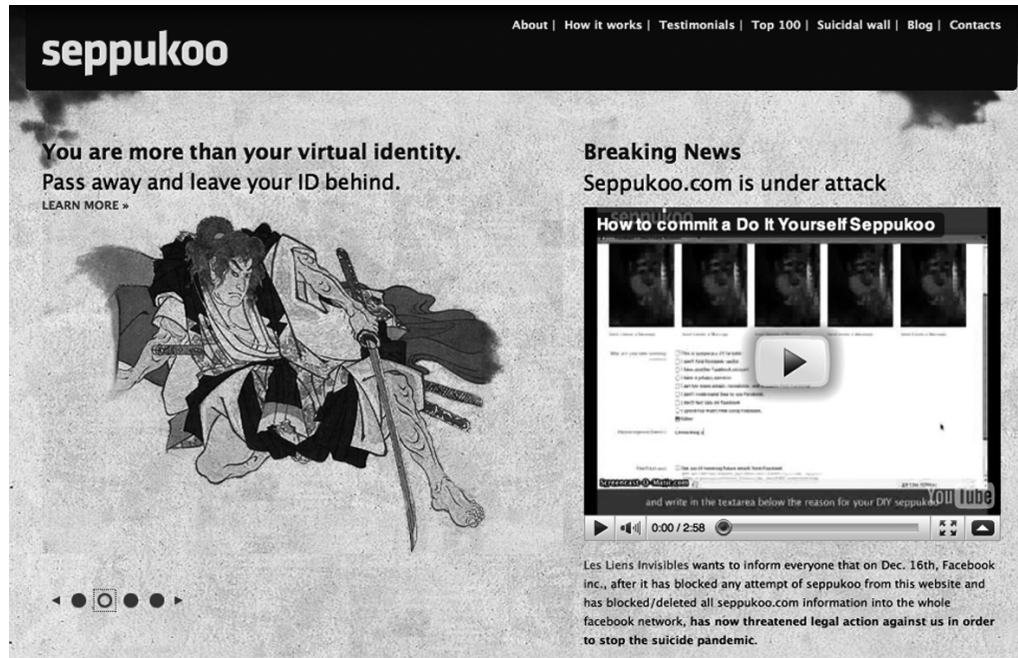


Fig. 5: Seppukoo

As with *Suicide Machine*, Facebook were fast to challenge the actions of Les Liens Invisibles, and issued a cease and desist letter claiming the work infringed their rights in accessing information for services furnished by third parties. The Seppukoo ‘about’ page explains Facebook’s double standards succinctly: “Suicide is a free choice and a kind of self-assertiveness. Unfortunately, Facebook doesn’t give to its users this faculty at all, and your account will be only deactivated.”

As Loretta Borrelli states in her interview with the producers of both *Web 2.0 Suicide machine* and *Seppukoo*, suicide has become “an act of undoubted political valiance” (2010). The detail of such projects demonstrates how the control of networked relations is increasingly managed through the dynamic interactions of technologies and biologies (the mixed reality management of life and death). The significance is explained in terms of the construction of certain kinds of subjectivity through the use of networked technologies. It is the ability of these technologies to allow social interconnections and participation that underpins their ideological power: “Communicative capitalism captures our political interventions, formatting them as contributions to its circuits of affect and entertainment - *we feel political, involved, like contributors who really matter.*” (Dean 2009, p. 49)

Documentation of a recent online performance by Eva and Franco Mattes would appear to exemplify the quote. In *No Fun* (2010), one of the artists simulates his suicide in a public webcam-based chatroom called Chatroulette, where you can meet people randomly all over the world for live webcam chats. People watch in real-time as the artist appears to hang from a rope for hours. The reactions are shocking for their lack of genuine concern; some laugh nervously, some take pictures with their mobiles, and most significantly people simply do not act. The performance illustrates what has already been referred to as a consensual hallucination, or empty spectacle, and it is hard not to be reminded of the affective power of the images from Abu Ghraib. The video documentation was banned from YouTube, which appears to grant it even more kudos in the charade it activates (there is even a “Banned from Youtube” logo displayed like a trophy on their site). In many ways, the premediation technologies employed are far more shocking than the fake content conveyed.



Fig 6: *No Fun* – “Reality is Overrated”

Following this line of thinking, participation in communicative technologies remains largely a fantasy, alongside the more general collective fantasies of the free market and fake global unity (aka globalisation). The pervasiveness of social media expose how the social is reproduced as an interpassive relation. Individuals imagine their active role in what ultimately is part of their subjugation. Moreover, the participatory work ethic of social networking is interpreted as an

expression of new forms of control over subjectivity. Rather than old forms of governance that would limit human action, the logic of governmentality functions to open spaces for social exchange, to generate data that can be mined to more effectively govern the actions of people, and to preempt any threats to the efficiency of its markets. People are encouraged to act but only in compromised forms. Virtual suicide stands as the stubborn *refusal* to operate under intolerable conditions of service such as those described and as such stands as an affirmation of the ability to be act autonomously.

Decisive action

When Berardi suggests that suicide is the decisive political act, he is pointing to transgressions of action. He cites the example of the Finnish youngster Pekka-Eric Auvinen, who turned up at Jokela High School (in 2007) and shot eight people before shooting himself. As can be seen in the (since banned) Youtube videos that preempt the massacre, Auvinen refers to himself as an “antihuman humanist” and can be seen wearing a T-shirt with the sentence “Humanity is overrated”.



Fig 7: Auvinen video still

So what constitutes good action? This is something that Paolo Virno has addressed in relation to the ability to act politically through his observation that the human animal is inherently capable of modifying its forms of life (2008). He uses the phrase “innovative action” that produces contradictory factors that reflect the human condition, its creative energies and their repression. Underpinning political action, and reflected in the title of Virno’s book *Multitude: Between Innovation and Negation*, the claim is founded on the ability of the multitude to create strategies that oscillate between innovation and negation, “of placing ‘not’ in front of ‘not human’.” (2008, p. 190) Echoing negative dialectics, Virno’s concern is to develop an understanding of negation, to outline a critique of capitalistic production as a negative condition that requires further negation.

The importance of ‘negation of negation’, as Žižek explains elsewhere, is to establish the system’s ‘real’ death in separation from its ‘symbolic’ death: ‘the system has to die twice’ (1999, p. 72; or, in the case of the ‘death of the author’, the metaphor must die too). Perhaps this further negation is what some of the examples introduced in the essay lack as they are locked into a frame of reference that refers to irony, rather than negation of negation; of protest, rather than refusal. Following Hegelian logic, negation of negation is crucial in moving from in-itself to for-itself (self-class-consciousness of conditions of exploitation). Yet, to Berardi, in *Precarious Rhapsody*, it is important to recognise that negation offers progressive innovation not new forms of totality (2009, p. 72). In making the qualification, he is addressing commonly held problems associated with the Hegelian historical subject, and instead stressing processes of “subjectivation” (instead of the subject, taking the phrase from Félix Guattari).

The problem of totality is similarly evident in friendship groups in social networking platforms. Indeed any action even of friendship is no longer confined to individual agents but to the distributed interactions of human and nonhuman agents operating dynamically. Berardi’s use of the term innovation also resonates with Virno’s in standing for something quite different from that which is associated with the instrumentalism of the creative industries. He refers to “dynamic recombination” as a way to rethink possibilities and radical strategies, such as the refusal of work, the invention of temporary autonomous zones, free software initiatives, and so on; virtual suicide might be added to the list.

To Berardi, the fundamental struggle is between machines for liberating desire and mechanisms of control over the imaginary. The psychopathology he speaks of relates to the ways in which technical systems and creative activity have been thoroughly captured by ‘semio-capital’ (to explain, ‘semio-capitalism’ is the term that he gives to the current system where informational capitalism has incorporated linguistic labour). He laments that we have been learning words from the machine and not from the mother (quoting Rose Golden from 1975) in situation where the learning of language and affectivity have been separated out (2009, p. 9). He is echoing Christian Marazzi’s writing on the relations between economics, language and affect: a situation where people have become effectively dyslexic, and “incapable of maintaining concentrated attention on the same object for a long time” (in Berardi 2009, p. 40-1). There are tragic consequences in terms of the psyche, as language acts on the construction of subjectivity. Consequently, according to Berardi, “If we want to understand the contemporary economy we must concern ourselves with the psychopathology of relations.” (2009, p. 37) He regards the current situation as a catastrophe of modern humanism, where we no longer have sufficient attention spans for love, tenderness and compassion.

In Berardi’s view, only the autonomy of intellectual labour from economic rule can save us. Indeed the refusal of work is closely associated with intellectual labour as representing a kind of freedom rather than labour that is bound to the unfreedom associated with profit and power. (He explains this through the characterisations of the “merchant who robbed collective intelligence”, Bill Gates, and “the idiot warrior”, George Bush, who together suffocated intelligence, 2009, p. 60). He is invoking the force of ‘general intellect’ and the social function of intellectual labour no longer separated from language, charted historically through Hegel’s

move from in-itself to for-itself to ‘mass intellectuality’.

But what of virtual suicide? What does it tell us about the economy, the human condition and our capacity for tenderness and compassion? It is worth remembering that unhappiness is generally encouraged to bolster consumption (so-called shopping therapy), and carefully engineered depression is in the interest of the pharmaceutical industry not least (and it is interestingly to note that Auvinen was on a type of antidepressant, said to cause suicidal tendencies as a side-effect). Indeed the issue of pharmacology is pertinent as various remedies can be imagined outside of standard drugs – not least the beneficial properties of intellectual work in general. Berardi reminds us that:

“The masters of the world do not want humanity to be happy, because a happy humanity would not let itself be caught up in productivity [...]. However, they try out useful techniques to make unhappiness moderate and tolerable, for postponing or preventing a suicidal explosion, for inducing consumption.” (2009, p. 43)

In these terms, virtual suicide can be considered effective refusal and the affirmation of the possibility of creative autonomy over intellectual labour and life itself. It decisively acts on a life half-lived in fear.

End.

Acknowledgements

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