Molding the Signifier by Ivor Diosi: An All-Too-Human Victor

Ondřej Cakl, International Centre for Art and New Technologies (CIANT), Prague. E-mail: ondrej.cakl@ciant.cz

Abstract

In this curatorial consideration, author reveals two factors that most essentially influenced the decision to present Ivor Diosi's artwork *Molding the Signifier*, as part of the Trust Me I'm an Artist EU project event in Prague (16-19 November 2016): It questions the notion of AI as it currently exists, suggesting that the ideas of "artificial," "independent" or "higher" intelligence and existence are all too human (and from that point of view therefore dangerous). As curator of the event, the author argues that *Molding the Signifier*, although it doesn't confront existing legislation, does question the ethical core of the essential latent purposes of bio-technologies as a means of human creativity.

I had desired it with an ardour that far exceeded moderation; but now that I had finished, the beauty of the dream vanished, and breathless horror and disgust filled my heart. (Victor Frankenstein)

If assessed only from an intellectual point of view, Ivor Diosi's *Molding the Signifier* incepts its core question into a cluster of ethically relevant topics that are present as constituents of its overall meaning and its installation presence. My intention is nevertheless to focus on the core of the "cluster" rather than reactivating all the "connecting points."

At first glance, *Molding the Signifier* indeed manifests some features that seem to differentiate this artwork from the current direction of Trust Me, I'm An Artist, as it doesn't question any actually applied legislation or ethics committee deliberation. It seems to escape from the tangible biosphere into the realm of virtual space inhabited by artificial intelligence, appearing to be something detached and hardly an issue for serious ethical thinking.

But let me first describe its *modus essendi* before revealing an ethical interpretation.

A two-dimensional narrative

In order to describe the work one has to consider an actual installation (something "standing" by definition) as a two dimensional narrative (something unstable by definition).

The first dimension: This is a hybrid bio-digital system. The process of *Molding the Signifier* begins with the *mold,* which grows in a petri dish. Its accretion is measured by a sensor, which sends the data to a system responsible for the behavior of an artificial being. Diosi created an "intelligence" with the appearance of young women. Three talking heads, three young faces, are projected on a white wall. Significantly, they recite the most important parts of Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics*, the parts concerning the division between the signified and the signifier. Their eyes follow the viewer's steps in the room and they seem to address the spectators with their monologue. They seem to care about what they are expressing but remain unable to depart from the programmed repetition of the text they are forced to recite.

There is only a one-way stream of data: from the mold to the "intelligence." The audience cannot actually decide to do other than participate in the process: by breathing (contributing to the overall humidity) and by engaging the artificial women, trying to catch their "attention."

The theme of hybridization of organic and digital destructive proliferation connects Diosi's work with pioneering computer art works by Joseph Nechvatal, simulations of time-based physics by Richard Brown and organic/digital interfaces by Sommerer and Mignonneau. But beyond listing the references, I would like to point out the specifics) [1].

Fig. 1. *Molding the Signifier* installed in Ex Post Prague, 18.11.2015. (© Ivor Diosi. Photo: Christophe Slussareff.)

The second dimension: It has its own timing and its own fate programmed. It is a time-based work, leading its audience through the narrative, not a performative fiction-creating mimetic act, not a play with its distance between stage and audience, but a real infliction of a mildew disease on a living intelligence, of which the audience can't avoid being a part.

The speech of the "ladies" is concise in the beginning, but over the *lifetime* of *Molding the Signifier*, as the mold grows and attacks the intelligence, their behavior shows increasing signs of language disorder and even imminent mental disease. Eventually they collapse. The infecting mold prevails, the fatum is fulfilled and the damage is done.

It all lasts two to three days. Visitors/actors within the room, who help the mold grow, cannot change the outcome but only accelerate and witness the decline (the more people come, the faster the accretion of the mold). They are literally dragged into inevitable participation in a collective crime, so to speak, by being *an audience* – i.e. in the position generally (and wrongly) considered as rather passive in relation to events.

ěSkipping obvious analogies with the observer effect [2], the fatalistic ethics of ancient tragedies, or reception theory [3], one must see that here, this "kidnapping of the audience" is part of the intention of installation. It is a part of the story, but this "kidnapping" has no activist component provoking the audience to react and choose the response towards the artist or work, because we are inevitably drawn into the game and made responsible for a process and result we cannot change.

As it is artificial, we might tend to ignore the fact that "someone" is slowly dying out there. Yet it is attractive and emotionally provoking, while it drags us into *factual* dealing with something *artificial* via a digital interface, which is what Eco would call "hyperreal" – absolute unreality is offered as a real presence [4].

It is here that the ethical questions arise, those that I find the most crucial for any serious ethical debate on biotechnologies: If artificial intelligence becomes increasingly co-developed with bio-technologies, is this what we should prepare ourselves

for? Is the immediate future of mankind the future of ruthless observation of semi-autonomous half-life creations failing to live before our eyes? Furthermore, *Molding the Signifier* tends to specifically revive human participatory guilt for causing harm to creatures brought to life by us – with a fuzzy awareness of this process for the spectator/participant. It simply suggests that we are already guilty by being human. And here the ethical essence of the work comes to light as it raises the question whether we as humans aren't destined to exist this way. Therefore, I think the ethical relevance of *Molding the Signifier* goes beyond current jurisprudence in biotechnologies and raises the question of human responsibility for creation of new life-forms. It also addresses the unforeseen negative consequences that might follow from our (human) use of biotechnology, given our insufficient knowledge of the natural world and our arrogance [5].

Frankenstein's nightmare

The ethical struggle around human dealings with technology has its roots in the very core of our approach towards the creation of otherness. The human dream of creating a higher level of intelligence and higher way of being is shattered by an incapability to create other than through control and exploitation.

Technology serves to rule the all-too-human world, but then again, it could be the path to something un-human, higher, better, artificial. From this point of view, the biggest danger for living artificial intelligence is that it will most likely be created and "brought to life" by us, average humans. Average humans whose imagination of un-human "otherness" sadly reaches only the image of artificial creatures taking over the rule of our civilization, unable even to realize that the whole idea of "ruling," "overcoming," etc. is all too human and is hardly connectable with anything un-humane [6].

We want to play gods and create artificial life, but *Molding the Signifier* forces the mold to live and grow only for the purpose of feeding the digital intelligence simulation (with data) and creates an artificial existence only to let it bitterly wither away in the solitude of a communication breakdown.

Besides its apparent pessimism and cruelty, the whole piece questions the very ethical core of technologies and artificial life: Isn't the fact that it will most likely be created and "brought to life" by average humans at the same time actually the biggest danger for artificial intelligence itself? Isn't it one of the most discredited notions of occidental civilization – the *belief* that technologies are actually un-human and that they represent the chance or threat of a new universe bereft of humanity – although those notions are just a mirror of our incapability? If we cannot think of a truly better afterlife, after humanity, if from the beginning we connect the idea of AI with the idea of overruling humanity, then our artificial successors will indeed simply wash us away into nothingness.

We are choosing our posthuman future ourselves. And this is hell . . . the brutal afterlife [7].

References and Notes

1. Frank Popper, *From Technological to Virtual Art* (The MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachussetts, London 2007).

2. Michael Nauenberg, (2011). "Does Quantum Mechanics Require A Conscious Observer?". Journal of Cosmology, 2011, Vol. 14. Retrieved January 20, 2016.

3. Hans Robert Jauss, *Aesthetic Experience and Literary Hermeneutics*. (U of Minnesota P, Minneapolis 1982)

4. Umberto Eco, *Travels in Hyperreality* (Harcourt, Inc., San Diego, New York, London 1986).

5. C.A.J. Coad, Playing God. In J. Savulescu & N. Bostrom (eds.), *Human Enhancement* (OUP, 2009), pp.155-80; Alexandre Erler, *Is "playing God" just a meaningless phrase?* <http://blog.practicalethics.ox.ac.uk/2010/05/is-playing-god-just-a-meaningless-phrase/>, accessed 15 March 2016

6. See: Kevin Warwick, *March of the Machines: The Breakthrough in Artificial Intelligence* (University of Illinois Press, Illinois 2004).

7. See: Bill Viola, "Vegetable memory 1978-80," in: *Reasons for Knocking at an Empty House*. Writings 1973-1994 (Thames and Hudson, Anthony d'Offay Gallery, London 1995) p. 87.