

“Silvia Bigi & Eleonora Roaro: Non-Binary Machines”

By Gabriela Galati

The exhibition title draws on the sixth chapter of James Bridle’s *Ways of Being: Beyond Human Intelligence* (2022), some of which ideas serve as a *trait d’union* between the projects of Silvia Bigi and Eleonora Roaro. In the book, the author proposes that binary machines—almost all the existing computers—represent the world reducing its complexity to a binary logic. Bridle writes: “Ever since the development of digital computers, we have shaped the world in their image. In particular, they have shaped our idea of truth and knowledge as being that which is calculable. Only that which is calculable is knowable, and so our ability to think with machines beyond our own experience, to imagine other ways of being with and alongside them, is desperately limited. This fundamentalist faith in computability is both violent and destructive: it bullies into little boxes what it can and erases what it can’t. In economics, it attributes value only to what it can count; in the social sciences it recognises only what it can map and represent; in psychology it gives meaning only to our own experience and denies that of unknowable, incalculable others. It brutalises the world, while blinding us to what we don’t even realise we don’t know.” (p.177)

These kind of computers are based on Alan Turing’s theorisation of the *a-machine*, or automatic machine because, once such a machine is set running, its behavior is entirely determined by its initial setup and input. It follows its instructions mechanically and cannot exceed the limits imposed by the data it is given.

However, in his PhD dissertation, Turing also devised another kind of machine, the oracle or *o-machine*, a machine that would halt of critical moments of undecidability waiting for an external input (or oracle) to aid it in making a choice. He stated though that this couldn’t be a machine and didn’t elaborate further.

Thus, since the very inception of computation, an alternative to *a-machines* existed, the *o-machine*, a kind of computer that considered that “an unknowable other is always present” (Bridle 2022: 177). It implied other “ways of being” machines—for sure less common—which don’t assimilate the world to their logic, but are more like the world, in other words, they are more “analogue” to the world.

Silvia Bigi’s *Sola* is a work dedicated to Francesca Alinovi, an Italian art critic and university lecturer who was murdered in 1983 at the age of thirty-five, in a case that today would be recognised as femicide. Her death—then framed as a crime of passion—contributed to the prolonged erasure of her visionary intellectual and critical work.

The project departs from a single word—*sola* (Italian for “alone”)—written seventy-seven times on a page of Alinovi’s journal, and from this trace reactivates her voice in a speculative and relational form. In Bigi’s project, solitude is framed not merely as absence or loss, but as a critical dimension in which structures of gendered subordination have operated and continue to operate. At the core of the work is a chatbot built using Retrieval-Augmented Generation (RAG) technology, incorporating the entirety of Alinovi’s writings—her essays,

notes, and interviews—many of which survive only in archives or libraries and are no longer in print or circulation.

Through carefully designed prompts, the chatbot is trained to impersonate Alinovi within a predetermined scenario, becoming an extra-corporeal, unstable, and resonant presence. The intention is not to make the chatbot simulate to be Alinovi; but to reactivate her absence. It does not interpret; it functions as a living and paradoxical relic, amplifying absence rather than filling it. Interaction with the system is for the artist alone to carry on, and takes place on a closed network, constituting an intimate, performative, and non-replicable experience. This restriction reinforces the work's refusal of transparency, accessibility, and reproducibility as dominant values of contemporary technological culture. In this sense, the chatbot at the core of *Sola* reverses the operation pursued by transhumanist imaginaries: rather than seeking “immortality” through the re-creation, simulation, or representation of the dead, the work reactivates the meaning of Alinovi's absence—both in relation to her critical thought and by foregrounding the gendered dynamics that shaped her murder and its subsequent erasure.

The private exchanges between Bigi and the chatbot generate fragments, notes, and visions that are subsequently transposed onto fabric using traditional printing techniques, specifically monotypes, forming a kind of shroud in which language becomes image. Beyond the intimacy of this dialogue, the chatbot also assumes the role of curator: following the artist's request, it conceives participatory performances that, while initiated by algorithmic processes, prompt human participants, who embody and enact them within the gallery space.

The issue of the male gaze and representations of the female in cinema, as investigated by Laura Mulvey (1975), is central to **Eleonora Roaro**'s ongoing project *Irma Vep*. Initiated in 2023, *Irma Vep* is a transmedia work inspired by one of the first *femme fatales* in the history of cinema. Portrayed by the actress Musidora, she was a cat suit-wearing burglar in the silent crime serial film *Les Vampires* (1915) written and directed by Louis Feuillade. Through this character, which is at the same time an alter ego of the artist, and a collective avatar, Roaro examines sex and sadomasochistic practices as dimensions of social power struggles and gendered dynamics. The exhibition presents a video, an IoT 3D-printed sculpture, a series of photographs—including a holographic one—, and drawings. The artist is also exploring the development of a videogame and hologrammatic photos and video, further expanding the mediatic possibilities of cinema to extend in turn the reflections on the topic.

The *Irma Vep* boot is an IoT sculpture titled *@irmavep_nowhere*, a 3D printed replica of the boot worn in the video. When the chatbot embedded in it interacts with users, the sculpture lights up in pink. The interaction between *Irma Vep* and users—which unfolds on Telegram, an app used by sex workers to communicate with clients—reverses the canonical, patriarchal association of AI systems with condescending attitudes, female voices, and female names—an association driven largely by their corporate origins: these systems are designed to be compliant in order to “hook” users for as long as possible, mirroring the engagement strategies of social media platforms.

Thus, the chatbot can be understood as an example of fauxtimation: some responses are automated and predetermined, while others are produced by a human presence. In this sense, it operates as an inverse Turing test: rather than a computer attempting to pass as human, a human seeks to be perceived as an *a-machine*, functioning

as a mechanical Turk of sorts. From this perspective, the work also connects to contemporary perceptions of sex work in the era of automation, in which sex workers are often treated as bots.

An interesting antecedent can be found in the infamous Ashley Madison affair, which might also be read as an ironic work of net.art. The case refers to the 2015 data breach of the extramarital dating platform Ashley Madison, which exposed the personal information, sexual preferences, and private communications of million users. Marketed under the slogan “Life is short. Have an affair,” the platform promised complete privacy and the deletion of all user data upon account closure—something it never actually did. As an article con *Artforum* at the time analysed: “[...] the tiny female user base didn’t matter much, because the bots were the heart of the business plan. They kept male users in the loop of paying to talk to an army of software instances of men’s versions of other men’s ideas of women.” (Brunton 2015). In this sense, Roaro’s work suggests that the issue may not concern sex workers perceived as bots alone, but rather a broader desire to leave the human behind to engage solely with machines.

Between automation and oracle, the works of Bigi and Roaro propose a different understanding of machines as critical agents in the reconfiguration of memory, desire, and power dynamics: non-binary machines not because they are non-digital, but because, in contrast to an on-off, 0–1 logic, they introduce undecidability as an alternative space for reflection and action.

References:

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