

A Very Short Programmatic Note on Believing in Technology

When it's time for change, for belief in the future, believing in technology -- the new iPhone or hybrid car engines -- is around the corner. If we say we believe in the internet or genetic engineering, do we posit it as some kind of 'transcendental signified', an irreducible term like 'God' or 'Truth', or do we believe in its *working*, a working that involves 'bringing everybody close together in the *global village*', a working that 'will solve the problems'?

Artists and artists' collectives, such as Critical Art Ensemble, have actively questioned the ethics of new 'problem-solving' technologies. Both CAE (Steve Kurtz in particular) and philosopher Peter Sloterdijk, with his treatise 'Rules for the Human Zoo,' experienced a considerable amount of resistance against their critical – or at least distrustful – attitude towards technology. In relation to this resistance, Bruno Latour – perhaps jokingly but let's take it serious here – suggested that where "socialism = soviets + electricity," "liberalism = platonism + genetics": since we, apparently, refuse to leave the Light, we engineer our vision.

Concerning this questioning attitude, we cannot get around Martin Heidegger's essay 'The Question Concerning Technology', a discussion of which is slightly beyond the scope of this note, but which ends with Heidegger positing that artistic research – which we sure hope has not died yet – has a special relationship with technological research: "Yet the more questioningly we ponder the essence of technology, the more mysterious the essence of art becomes." Taking into account Derrida's critique of the phonologic nature of Heidegger's discourse (all *tekhnē* is essentially reduced to *Dichtung*, poetry is favoured over literature), we might, in the small space that's left of this note, shift our attention to a 'pseudomorph' (such as the first cars that still resembled wagons) in the discourse on *tekhnē* and technology.

Dick Raaijmakers, one of the early electronics pioneers and conceptual multimedia artists of the twentieth century, has written a relatively unknown treatise on the perception and production of *techniek* (technique, *tekhnē*), entitled 'The Method', styled as a 'didactic poem'. Contrary to other poetic forms, the *phōnē*, in short, sound-word structure of didactic poetry, reinforces the *hypomnēma*, the memory, memorisation – and not the *sēma*, sign/meaning – of the words like in 'ordinary' poetry. It is a poetic writing that cannot simply be reduced to *Dichtung*. Furthermore, his treatise on 'method' is decidedly 'anti-methodical', in the sense that it doesn't propose a structured hermeneutics, but more a play on shooting, falling and getting up. Raaijmakers' thinking and rethinking of the within of technology might provide a path for moving away from Heidegger's stalemate. We find, for example, common themes such as 'hiding' and 'masking', not in a whirlpool around a metaphysical drain, but in a play that is purposely elusive:

"An outsider who eyes the technical construction
can read the construction plan and say:
'I see what the construction means
and how in a moment it will work the world.'
But he can be mistaken!
(The plan 'hides' in the construction.)"

I believe, that if we take the fundamental notions of Raaijmakers' discourse, we might be able to formulate, next to Heidegger, an approach that is not *phonic* or poetic, but text-driven, including forms of hieroglyphic writing, graphic user interfaces, pre-programmed emoticons and SMS shorthand, that would otherwise escape our attention: ':' is not just a typographic invention; it is the reintroduction of hieroglyphic

writing (unless of course we claim that all writing is hieroglyphic, which basically doesn't get us anywhere). Raaijmakers' discourse is also actively questioning technology and its implications for our society and our body.

“Technique, on the contrary, knows the law --
and also considers it.
Each time when it advances in the direction of the future
it finds the law in its way.
The law, with its face towards the past,
blocks the road for the technique.
Thus, in this position,
the law tests the technique
and the technique tests the law.
(They assess and test each other's constructions
on the point of consistency and reliability.)”

The law is only the other of technique; they test, they block but don't question each other. The law as a mute sphinx. It is this sphinx that we should reawaken, and serve its riddles to a scientific practice that requires questioning. “Questioning is the piety of thought,” claims our accomplice Heidegger, but not piety with nature, the world, our society, or our bodies. Rather, it is piety with and through itself, trying to maneuver around all traps, lures and dead ends of thought and writing.

Vincent W.J. van Gerven Oei

Vincent W.J. van Gerven Oei is an artist and theorist who lives and works in the Netherlands. He is currently working towards a PhD in Media Philosophy at the European Graduate School in Saas-Fee and is also preparing a translation of Dick Raaijmakers *De methode* ('The Method'). □ For more information, visit <http://www.vincentwj.nl/>.