

# The Dawn of the Dead: (Improbable) Art After AI-Zombie Apocalypse<sup>1</sup>

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**In recent years there has been growing interest in artificial neural networks (ANNs) which are quickly becoming the primary device for machine learning. Used for finding patterns in large data sets, ANNs were also recently employed in many artistic contexts: as tools for artists, semi-independent creators of content, and even as invisible “critics” which / who predict our aesthetic preferences. The aim of this paper is to speculate about the disruptive effect of these ‘alien agencies’ on the (modernist) aesthetic regime of art centred around the notion of autonomy. The author examines how neural networks and connectionist epistemologies may potentially affect the most common ways of producing, circulating, and valorising art. He claims that the possibility of automatizing creativity and art criticism may lead to the emergence of a new aesthetic regime based on forms of dynamic, distributed and probabilistic governance.**

*Artificial neural networks. Aesthetics. Regimes of art. Posthuman aesthetics. Digital aesthetics.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The rumour goes that Rembrandt’s ‘A Cat Sitting on MacBook Air’ and Van Gogh’s ‘Petunias (by Kac)’ were recently discovered and soon will be on display in Louvre in Paris (in collaboration with Google and MIT). This event is planned as a follow-up to the recent presentation of ‘The Next Rembrandt’ (alternative title ‘A Dude Who Never Existed’) which was unveiled in Amsterdam at Rembrandt House in 2016 (in collaboration with ING and Microsoft). The 3D-printed painting was co-created by a team of programmers, art historians and a deep learning algorithm which analysed all existing 346 works of the Dutch Master to learn his ‘signature style’ (Blakemore 2016). Understandably, the project attracted a lot of interest and – naturally – incited controversies concerning its rightful allocation (uglow 2017): does it belong to the museum or gallery? And if so, then to what kind of museum? Of contemporary or classical art? Or maybe it ‘deserves’ a new kind of institution altogether which could serve as a ghetto for masterpieces made by non-human agents? But would it not be *Entartete Kunst* all over again? *District 9* for inhuman art?

Such considerations may sound as untimely and ridiculous science fiction, but art made by artificial neural networks (ANNs) and deep learning algorithms has already been shown in galleries and

sold on auctions (for example, by Gray Area Foundation for the Arts). And – to make things even more complex and confusing for art critics – different neural networks are being used not as mere tools (or companions) by artists, but also as intelligent agents ‘who’ predict our aesthetic choices (‘if you liked this movie, then there is 67 per cent chance that you will also like that one’), or even as virtual museum-goers ‘who’ study art by analysing databases in museum collections. It is thus reasonable to speculate that deep learning software based on neural networks, which spread so rapidly in recent years across social networks and major entertainment websites, may potentially create a completely new aesthetic environment, in part visible (in the form of images), and in part invisible (in the form of ‘suggestions’). So even though artists/engineers who ‘use’ deep learning technology for creative purpose claim that they simply use the tools offered to them by engineers (Tyka 2015), just like artists in the past were handed cameras and graphic programs, I would argue that the issue we are facing is, in fact, far more complicated.

First of all, photography, often regarded as the first ‘mechanical art’, had to wait for over a century to be finally recognised by art institutions (Cotton 2004), whereas the recognition of deep learning software as art medium came almost instantaneously.

Secondly, although I would hesitate to make strong essentialist distinctions, there is one crucial difference between mechanical cameras and neural networks: when the former do not change (significantly) in the process of making pictures, the latter evolve in time. As a result, nets which share the same initial architecture must vary significantly depending on their 'experience': it is possible to imagine fully functional software capable of mimicking Rembrandt, Picasso, or even of creating an uncanny hybrid of the two.

The second – and even more important – difference explaining why neural networks were immediately embraced by the art world and its institutions is cultural. In many ways contemporary art market and critical discourse has been long ready to welcome Rembrasso and his undead friends. It suffices to mention in this context that once popular prefixes like 'neo-' or 'post-' were recently supplemented by a new term eagerly added by critics to the old labels of art movements: the 'zombie'. Hence, if 'zombie formalism' could have been 'the new thing' on the market a few years ago (Robinson 2014), opening new exhibitions in the future may as well be advertised as opening old graves. Are we thus doomed to a zombie apocalypse and the eternal return of old classics mating and merging in the deepest layers of neural networks? I want to argue and speculate that the introduction of Artificial Neural Networks (ANNs) technologies into the art field can, in fact, disrupt the axiological and institutional foundations of modern Western aesthetics and of our 'regime of art'. To reflect on such possibility I will try to examine the technological specificity of neural networks in the context of Jacques Rancière's philosophy. I find his arguments and categories particularly appropriate for such speculation, because they allow me to include wider political and communicational ramifications and at the same time avoid techno-determinist simplification. Moreover, Rancière's approach to aesthetics emphasises the intersubjective dimension of art and the distributed character of aesthetic values. Regimes of art, as he defines them, are 'specific types of connection between ways of producing works of art or developing practices, forms of visibility that disclose them, and ways of conceptualizing the former and the latter' (Rancière 2006: 20). Each regime can be thus understood – in slightly cybernetic terms – as a distinctive autopoietic system that emerges spontaneously and governs how artworks are produced, distributed, valued and used. In my opinion, the sheer possibility of employing neural networks to automatise 'production of works of art' and to administer 'forms of their visibility' must – as a result – somehow affect the way of 'conceptualizing the former and the latter'. It is highly problematic to consider deep learning software –

used, for example, for making applications for artists – in terms of simple tools or 'a new medium'.

What characterises and distinguishes neural networks from other types of algorithms (and programs) is the degree of autonomy in data processing. In *Radical Technologies* Adam Greenfield writes that neural networks possess 'the ability to perform complicated tasks without being explicitly instructed in how to do so, and it is how they now stand to acquire the capabilities we have previously thought of as the exclusive province of the human' (2017). Thus, reducing virtual Rembrandts and other 'deep dreamers' to objects only manipulated by humans would be a mistake. Hence my question: can our aesthetic categories still hold in the age of artificial artists, zombie returns, statistical criticism, and augmentation of taste? Art is no longer only a human endeavour, so the long-lasting trichotomy of artist, medium and material becomes dubious.

However, I do not want to suggest that the introduction of a new technology into the field of artistic practice must simply cause a dramatic cultural change. It would be ridiculous to argue for direct causation in the complex and heterogeneous reality of contemporary art practice. On the contrary, an epistemological revolution which in the first place allowed critics, museum directors, curators and art dealers to conceive of images produced by Artificial Intelligence as art has already been creeping in for a long time. The possibility of speculating about 'the new' is always founded on the observation of the epistemological peripheries. A theoretical investigation of ANNs in the context of art can shed some light both on the present state of our aesthetic regime and on their possible futures.

## **2. CONNECTIONIST EPISTEMOLOGY AND THE AUTONOMOUS SUBJECT**

I will begin my considerations by raising an objection to the theoretical framework I will be using, that is Rancière's theory of "regimes of art". What strikes me the most about his categorization is its deeply conservative anthropocentrism hidden underneath the layers of conceptual inventiveness, progressive political agenda and critical insight. In actuality his argument is directed against the wide-spread assumption that the avant-garde was responsible for revolutionizing art and its relation to politics and social life. Rancière claims that avant-garde artists were, as a matter of fact, not rebels, but successors of the 19th-century modernists who laid foundations for the idea of art autonomy (2006: 30). What linked romantic poets and avant-garde experimenters – who seem to belong to completely different epistemological and aesthetic paradigms – was the absolute autonomy of the artistic object (or of art as

such). This theory elegantly explains, for example, why it turned out to be so easy to hijack and reroute the anti-bourgeois art of the early avant-garde by the bourgeois institutions. Rancière's subversive conservatism makes him also sceptical towards the popular assumption that mechanical reproduction played a crucial role in the process of giving voice to the masses (Benjamin 1969 [1936]). He writes: 'In order for the mechanical arts to be able to confer visibility on the masses, or rather on anonymous individuals, they first need to be recognized as arts. That is to say that they first need to be put into practice and recognized as something other than techniques of reproduction or transmission' (2006: 32). To support this view he reminds us that the appreciation of the mundane and everyday life can be traced to the times before the invention of daguerreotype, whereas the success of realism and naturalism (also as literature for the bourgeois) definitely predates mass cinematography.

On the one hand, this understanding of the relation between technology and culture – the primacy of the latter over the former – holds true for my considerations too. If we look at the new emerging practices on the Internet and its semi-formal, distributed institutions which display art on social media, we can already see some crucial differences between the 'old order' and the 'new chaos' dissolving categories like authorship and artwork. On the other, it would be a mistake to overlook how certain technologies influence, affect and alter already existing processes. And just like the availability of cheap reproductions transmitted through unidirectional media (books, TV), accelerated and reinforced the tendency to celebrate star artists, one can imagine that neural network software which is capable of producing 'The Next Rembrandts' et cetera will allow various actors to find new methods of profiting from Old Masters' art. However, the possibility of endless creation of new Breughels, Vermeers, Poussins and others may eventually change the very reasons for celebrating 'the original'.

We can also approach this process differently by focusing on more indirect and subtler ways of technological determination. For example, many scientists and philosophers point out (Oliveira 2017, Perez 2018) that neural networks not only revolutionise information sciences and software industry, but also undermine our social, political, and existential categories. There is, of course, nothing exceptional in the fact that a technological device – treated metaphorically – serves as an epistemological tool to discover new 'truths' about ourselves (Draaisma 2000). Even camera proved to be a useful device for those philosophers and neuroscientists who in the 19th century posited analogies between physical processes of taking pictures and creating memories (hence the term

'photographic memory'). Yet it is still possible to maintain that there is an important difference between clay tablets, cameras, computers, and holograms on the one hand and artificial neural networks on the other, which are mathematical models describing the 'character of nervous activity' (McCulloch, Pitts 1943). This time around it was the discourse of biology which informed and inspired mathematicians and computer scientists to look for new concepts. For that reason the history of scientific research on neural networks (Bishop 2014) in many ways coincides and intersects with the emergence of a new paradigm in neurosciences and philosophy of mind labelled as 'connectionism'. And the growing popularity of connectionist theories in recent years was induced – at least to some extent – by the successes of engineers working on non-symbolic AIs.

The key idea behind connectionism is that biological organisms think in an inherently distributed and non-symbolic way (O'Brien, Opie 2002): human mind is a network functioning in an environment composed of other networks. Thoughts – falsely perceived by humans as essentially logical and meaningful – are actually activation patterns of neurons in complex and interconnected webs. For instance, according to the connectionist interpretation the meaning of a word should not be understood as a referential relation between an arbitrary set of sounds or letters and an abstract concept, but rather as a path of activation between areas in a neural network. And these pathways must vary for every individual, so it becomes impossible to find a universal model of thought. Moreover, these pathways are never fixed for good. Mental representations made of distributed sets of smaller micro-representations change dynamically through experience and learning: sometimes by forming new associations between neurons, sometimes by slightly changing values in the existing connections. As the activation levels of neurons always cover a spectrum of electrical intensity (values), thought processes are thus more probabilistic than deterministic. To give an example: seeing my dog in the morning will probably lead me to think about feeding it, but there is always a chance (depending on context) to experience less probable activation patterns (which would be called 'interesting thoughts' or 'creative reflections'). From the connectionist perspective thoughts executed in neural networks consist in forming and computing simple relations between nodes. What causes me to eventually feed the dog is not some abstract understanding of the digestive process in mammals but years of (mindless) successful repetition resulting in low levels of environmental uncertainty (satisfied dog on a couch vs. restless and irritated creature).

For many scientists this new approach to cognition is revolutionary. Andy Clark and Rudi Lutz claim that

the recent successes in the field of neural networks can turn out to be of great epistemological importance for the simple reason that they falsify the common consensus about thinking and intelligence as symbolic processes. Connectionism brings thus a – yet another – ‘Copernican Revolution’ and may eventually overthrow the essentialist foundations of the ‘rationalist picture of mental life’ in cognitive sciences and (folk) psychology (1992: 11). And although Clark and Lutz refrain from further generalization, the impact of this epistemological shift can reach even further into culture and politics. Reconceptualising intelligence as an emergent phenomenon that arises from a large number of micro-process in complex networks calls into question some of the uncontested assumptions of the Western rationalist culture.

One of such assumptions is human autonomy (liberal subject) which, in turn, relies on the belief in free will and universal bases of rationality. Connectionist claims about the distributed nature of thinking undermine this ideal, while deep learning software, like the one used to make the Next Rembrandt, exposes the possibility to reverse-engineer individual sensibilities. The appearance of intelligent machinic agents in the field of culture which / who are capable of creation poses a serious threat to the Western *episteme*. And this is particularly important in the context of modern art which – as Rancière convincingly demonstrates – supports the political project of Enlightenment by reinforcing the notion of the autonomous individual. It was possible for Rancière to downplay the role of ‘technical reproduction’, because the technology could have been considered a passive tool in the hands of an autonomous human being. Copies were derivatives of the art work (material object which can be accessed), and the art work was an expression of the irreproducible identity. For that reason – as it turned out – despite Walter Benjamin’s speculations mechanical reproduction only strengthened the cultural bias towards celebrating art in relation to the artist’s persona. But deep learning software which enables translation of Rembrandts, Goyas or even Mozarts into a myriad of connections in a neural network makes this paradigm somewhat problematic. It is not only the technology itself which proves disruptive for the cultural values – also the epistemological revolution which undermines old categories and beliefs can play a role in the weakening of the aesthetic regime.

### 3. TOWARDS NON-AUTONOMOUS ART

Although Rancière speaks of three regimes of art that can be singled out in the so-called ‘Western tradition’, I will focus only on the last one: the aesthetic. The reason for that is simple: both ethical and representative regime, though still very present

in contemporary culture, play only a minor role in the institutionalised (professional) channels of art circulation. The ethical – ‘primarily concerned with the origin and telos of imagery in relationship to the ethos of the community’ (Rockhill 2004: 4) – and the representative – establishing axioms that pin down arts’ appropriate forms – function on the margins of the art market and (contemporary) art institutions. What is even more important, these institutions which are often criticised and influenced by the defendants of the ethical or representative duties of art, were, in fact, decisively shaped by the aesthetic regime.<sup>ii</sup>

In *The Politics of Aesthetics* Rancière argues that the seemingly commonsensical understanding of artworks as things ‘extricated from their ordinary connections’ emerged relatively late: in the 18th century. Only after the downfall of the *ancien régime* could art have liberated from the rigid classification of art forms (*paragone*) and hierarchy of genres which tied forms of expression to appropriate subject matter (tragedy for the noble, etc.). By identifying art with absolute autonomy the emerging aesthetic regime delegitimised old criteria for distinguishing ‘true’ works of art. However, in practice – to compensate for the lack of a standardised model (poetics) – new art institutions and critical discourses had to be invented to solidify this newly obtained autonomy. After the French Revolution artists – and their allies among critics – began to contest norms and proclaim independently what can be considered as art. Meanwhile new art institutions – independent salons, galleries and even theatres – engaged in a political process of creating a new kind of subjectivity: that of a liberal, middle-class citizen (Elias 2010 [1939]). And although Rancière does not elaborate in details on the exact relation between modern art and the formation of a ‘specific type of humanity’, the aesthetic autonomy of art was crucially connected to the notion of the individual autonomy: the artists were free to express themselves through their works, whereas the viewers could depend on themselves in matters of taste. For example, in Kant’s view aesthetics judgments are determined by subjective experience (2007 [1970]: 34), and in Schiller’s utopian project (aesthetic state) the role of art in democratic society lies in its power to educate free citizens (1954 [1795]: 140). To sum up, by praising the autonomy of art the aesthetic regime established an intricate infrastructure of institutions, critical discourses and practices which also reinforced individual autonomy. Therefore, despite many attempts at revolting against this *status quo* – mostly by the avant-garde(s) – the name of the individual remained the primary form of indexing and assigning value to artworks.<sup>iii</sup>

Without a doubt ‘The Next Rembrandt’ can be easily situated within this paradigm. Indeed, the new-old

painting was celebrated and attracted interest precisely because of the importance and value assigned to the name of the Old Master. However, the sheer possibility to extract 'the essence' of Rembrandt's style and exploit it to create new masterpieces disproves the metaphysical assumption about the singular and irreproducible character of individual aesthetic sensibilities. The devil is in the (technical) detail – the computer-generated picture is neither a copy, nor a new picture (hence 'The Next'?). It contradicts the assumption of such dichotomy. The neural network trained to learn the specificity of a particular style does not translate it into a set of universal rules (deterministic algorithms), but rather develops a probabilistic (and fuzzy) model of aesthetic preferences. In the case of the 'Next Rembrandt' project, as explained on the official website, 'a facial recognition algorithm identified and classified the most typical geometric patterns used by Rembrandt to paint human features. It then used the learned principles to replicate the style and generate new facial features for our painting'. In other words, the network studied Rembrandt's paintings long enough to spot regularities typical of the way he portrayed his characters. And what is of note here is the fact that the software used for that goal was not written with this particular task in mind, so it cannot be argued that the genius artist was replaced by a genius scientist who managed to formalise 'Rembrandtness'. After hours of analysing pictures and finding regularities, a program which could be used otherwise developed a distributed Rembrandt-algorithm. Its specificity was dependent on 'data' and was not determined by intentionally programmed algorithmic infrastructure. It is also important to mention in this context that the computational architecture of neural networks does not fit into the standard von Neumann's model of computation which separates between Processing Units and Memory Units. Software written for von Neumann machines is always programmed in high-level languages like C or Java (which can be learned by humans) and only later translated into a low-level assembly language. For that reason, programs written in symbolic languages establish a rigid frame of possible operations. To change the program one has to (intentionally) break into the source code and change specific instructions. One can thus stand by the division into intelligent design (programmed by intelligent and intentional beings) and stupid data. In turn, neural nets possess the ability to learn on their own and in essence can be understood as programming themselves, with or without supervision, depending on the architecture. When neural networks analyse data looking for (any) patterns, they do not exactly 'know' what they are looking for.

Looking at this fact from an epistemological point of view, it can be argued that ANNs as semi-

independent agents interrupt the chain of intentional conduct between humans, their tools and final products. That is why, even if a network manages to produce the most astonishing, abstract and exceptional images, these cannot be considered products of an autonomous mind (or a genius programmer for that matter). The Next Picassos – made and circulating on the art market in the name of their genius creator – will be nothing more and nothing less than products of big data analysis and probabilistic projections of the results. But if individual sensibility is thus proven to be computable and transferable ('Can you send me klee.art? I need a new rug and always thought that he would make a great weaver'), the idea of irreducible (singular) genius can – in the long run – turn out to be difficult to sustain.

Of course, we can (and probably will for some time) anthropomorphise neural networks as artists. The titles of articles in newspapers informing about art projects involving ANNs reveal this humanistic bias: *New Neural Algorithm Can 'Paint' Photos In Style Of Any Artist* (Dainius 2016), *Deep Learning Paints Videos in Style of Art Masters* (Salian 2016), *Google's art machine just wrote its first song* (Brandom 2016) etc. However, anthropomorphising software – that is strengthening associations between humans and machines – could potentially lead to the emancipation of automatised arts. This will probably fit perfectly into the already-present tendency in contemporary art to liberate media, which Peter Weibel describes in the following passage of *Postmedia Condition*: '[S]tate of current art practice is best referred to as the post-media condition, because no single medium is dominant any longer; instead, all of the different media influence and determine each other. (...) The very terms "user innovation" or "consumer generated content" bear witness to the birth of a new kind of democratic art in which everyone can participate' (2012). Neural networks – as *quasi-media* that possess their own 'alien agencies' (Salter 2015) – add another element to this equation and liberate arts from the constraints of the older regimes of art.

However, the revelation that aesthetic sensibilities are computable in the form of distributed representation in neural networks can potentially lead to the moment of 'aesthetic singularity', that is, identification of artworks, artists, and art markets as types of networks. Interestingly, this weird idea popped-up in the mind of John Cage – stimulated by Norbert Wiener's cybernetics and Buckminster Fuller's futurology – who already decades ago compared Robert Rauschenberg's paintings to 'nets' (1973: 100). According to Cage, the remarkable quality of Rauschenberg's body of work consisted in that it neither represented reality (as something fixed and external) nor expressed his ideas (internal states), but rather simply established

connections between objects on canvas. Within such conceptual framework one can also think of artist's individual sensibility as a form of self-trained network which creates new networks (on canvases) to circulate in larger networks of art distribution.

To end my speculations about the potential "crisis" in the aesthetic regime of art I would also like to remark that the high valorisation of the original and the celebration of the author should also be seen in an economic perspective. The relative importance assigned to 'masterpieces' stems from their scarcity (as originals, signed copies etc.) and the finite (mortal) nature of the creative individual. Again, it explains why mechanical reproduction of art and the celebration of the original can co-exist peacefully or even reinforce one another. In contrast, by undermining the dogma of scarce geniuses the zombification of art market and of creative production questions the very logic which dictates how and why we deal with art in the first place. Of course, the unconvinced might still argue that neural networks are only capable of 'reverse-engineering' old culture stored in digital databases. However, it is easy to imagine networks fed with more diversified data and thus producing completely new aesthetics, just like Alpha-Go, a neural network that won with Lee Sedol, the world champion in Go, surprised everyone by coming up with unique strategies, described by many commentators as 'beautiful' (Metz 2016). The inclination to use neural networks to mimic old masters – which we observe today – only exposes the anthropocentric bias of some engineers and of the aesthetic regime.<sup>iv</sup> The machines are not to blame here.

#### **4. TOWARDS A PROBABILISTIC REGIME OF ART?**

It is not my intention to suggest that the zombification of art will contribute to the exclusion of humans from the creation of art. On the contrary, the disruptive effect of including 'intelligent agents' into the social networks opens up new possibilities of play and cooperation between machinic and human neural networks. One example of such co-operation is *Neural Exchange*, a collaborative project initiated by John Gerrard, who used Google's TensorFlow software to analyse patterns of movements performed by a team of athletes. Patterns recognised by the network were then used to train a 3D leaf-covered figure which executed its weird choreography in an empty space of digital simulation. Moreover, the instantaneous appearance of such websites as [deepart.io](http://deepart.io) or [deepdreamgenerator.com](http://deepdreamgenerator.com) indicates that the Internet and its vast databases of easily-accessible images, sounds and text will provide the primary infrastructure for art co-created with neural

networks. Hopefully, zombies will be joined by other monstrosities and miscreations to play with.

Nevertheless, what can turn out to be crucial with regard to the emergence of a new regime of art is:

- (i) the vastness of databases which open up almost infinite space of possibility for creative co-operation;
- (ii) unquestionable hegemony of the Internet as physical infrastructure for the creation and circulation of 'artworks';
- (iii) yet another 'death of the Author', this time, though, resulting from quite literal emancipation of artistic 'media'.

These three factors may contribute to the slow emergence of what I would like to call a 'probabilistic regime of art'. I want to speculate that the specific 'type of connection' between ways of making art, distributing it and categorizing it will shift towards forms of dynamic, distributed and probabilistic governance. The adjective 'probabilistic' refers to two different aspects of such hypothetical 'system'. Firstly to the fuzzy and uncertain character of new critical discourses which replace symbolic rigidity of categories typical for literary culture with collective and distributed forms of 'content distribution'. Of course first signs of such transition are clearly visible and the role of deep learning technologies, employed for prediction and guidance of Internet users, has already been recognised and reflected upon (Mackenzie 2015). Services like Spotify which own large databases of 'art' rely on neural networks to provide listeners with virtual assistance. These probabilistic systems which predict individual taste to make suggestions do not – by any means – exclude other forms of distributing information about art. Instead, systems of probabilistic guidance interact with individual users (listeners), content creators (musicians) and institutions (magazines publishing playlists) to create complex systems of feedback. These complex, networked and not only human systems of connecting and transmitting art definitely do not fit into any of Rancière's regimes. The rule of the autonomy, crucial in the aesthetic order, is displaced by the supremacy of interconnectedness. On top of that, as I would like to suggest, popularisation of ANNs – that is non-symbolic intelligences – slowly undermines the hegemony of the symbolic systems of governance.

By the other 'probabilistic' aspect of the postulated regime I suggest that automation of creativity and potential overabundance of art can possibly lead to the appreciation of 'improbability'. Although this part of my argument is more speculative, some of the recent trends in contemporary art would confirm such a hypothesis. For example, the widespread celebration of weirdness and uncanniness among

'postinternet' artists can be understood in such terms. It is no coincidence – although implying causation would be an overstatement – that many of the artists who are associated with this new aesthetics, like Zach Blas or Cecile B. Evans, parasitise on critical (academic) discourses, but only to expose the inefficiency and inadequacy of symbolic reasoning in the age of complex networks. In one of the manifestos written for the 9th Berlin Biennale, which was probably the biggest celebration of postinternet weirdness, Rob Horning wrote symptomatically: 'Content on the internet is pure form. We are scandalized by its lack of meaning' (2016). What seems like a Baudrillardian fatalism soon takes an unexpected turn. If social networks unavoidably turn people into 'farms of content', the only left to do is to make it weird: 'Having a self (...) is to generate content that becomes harder to comprehend and integrate as it accumulates.' His bizarre standpoint which equates selfhood with artistic production also corresponds with a cultural phenomenon of a much bigger scale, namely the 'dank' culture of internet natives. Its identity lies exactly in the fetishisation of the weird, incomprehensible, obscure – of messages (memes) that seem highly improbable while still possessing the minimum amount of meaning. New content quickly attracts attention, because of its obscurity, then spreads rapidly through social media, its initial value inflates (at this moment it is appropriated by 'the normies') and the swarm moves on, just like a horde of zombies. However, the attraction to the obscure, unlike in the aesthetic regime, must coincide with absolute non-autonomy – the 'artwork' is there to circulate, definitely not to be left alone on a pedestal. The original meme is worth just as much as any other. In the end, its value depends only on its probability: the dank community celebrates the lower values, 'normies' are attracted by the higher ones. It is, of course, nothing more than fortune-telling on my behalf, but it seems possible to me that in a reality flooded with images, songs, poems and 3D-printed sculptures we will have to rely on the notion of probability to make any sense of this complex mess.

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<sup>ii</sup> Of course, Rancière does not claim that the aesthetic regime simply replaced the previous ones. On the contrary, the new understanding of art entered into a never-ending battle between them. For example, the museum – the key institution of the emerging nation states – was and still is connected to the state power. However, as he notices in his other book, *Aisthesis: Scenes from the Aesthetic Regime of Art*, one of the first attempts to establish the modern science of art by Johann Winckelmann in the mid-18th century was conducted in the name of the 'autonomous' object: 'Winckelmann inaugurates the age during which artists were busy unleashing the sensible potential hidden in inexpressiveness, indifference or immobility, composing

the conflicting movements of the dancing body, but also of the sentence, the surface, or the coloured touch that arrest the story while telling it, that suspend meaning by making it pass by or avoid the very figure they designate' (2013: 9). Rancière finds this – seemingly unimportant – remark by the German art historian so revealing, because it announces the forthcoming appropriation of modern art and its 'autonomous objects'.

<sup>iii</sup> Similar point was made by Boris Groys who stated that: 'the avant-garde never fully succeeded in its quest for the real because the reality of art—its material side, which the avant-garde tried to thematize—was permanently re-aestheticized' (2016). Even the sincerest attempts at depersonalisation and dispersion of art in the real life were deterred by institutions of the aesthetic regime.

<sup>iv</sup> I find such attempts at essentializing 'human creation' by assuming its inherent 'creativity' a bit surprising in the age of 'retromania'.