

# DIGITAL **AGNES**

Agnes Etherington Art Centre at Queen's University  
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## **Navigating Digital Capitalism**

*Agnes Bytes*

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### **SPEAKER**

Danuta Sierhuis, Luisa Ji and Tristan Sauer

### **TRANSCRIPT**

**Danuta Sierhuis:** Hi everyone, and welcome to the next talk of *Agnes Bytes*, a new series of lunchtime talks on critical themes in digital art and culture. I am Danuta Sierhuis, the Digital Development Coordinator at Agnes Etherington Art Centre at Queen's University, and I use she/her pronouns.

Thank you all for joining us today on your lunch hour, while we meet online today on Zoom. I would like to begin by acknowledging that Agnes Etherington Art Centre is located in what is known as Ka'tarohkwi, otherwise colonially known as Kingston, on the homelands of the Haudenosaunee, Anishnaabe and Huron-Wendat peoples and that this place is also home to many members of the Métis nation. I understand that this land is subject to the Dish with One Spoon Wampum, a covenant between the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, the Three Fires Confederacy, and other allied nations, including settlers, to peaceably share and care for the land and resources in and around the Great Lakes.

As a white settler of European ancestry, I understand it is incumbent on me and others like me to recognize the ways in which we are complicit in upholding the status quo of the colonial state, and that we must also strive to unlearn behaviors and mindsets and to uphold the sovereignty of our Indigenous neighbours.

Digital spaces also carry their own histories of harm towards Indigenous peoples, and that technology made under settler-capitalism is never neutral. It is imperative to have critical conversations, to interrogate and to hold accountable our use of digital tools and in the creation of digital spaces. Indeed, we are currently meeting in a digital space (on Zoom),

which is a helpful tool for facilitating conversations, gatherings and organizing across geographies. However, the technology and infrastructures of Zoom, and [the technologies] upon which the Internet itself depends, have inherent biases and are built from resource extraction, the appropriation of land and the displacement of Indigenous peoples across Turtle Island.

There are many Indigenous and non-Indigenous artists, scholars, designers and technologists alike that are dreaming and working towards digital and technological futurities that are led and informed by more expansive epistemologies that are grounded in an ethics of care and of multiplicity. As the series develops, I am hoping that each *Agnes Bytes* can engage with this mindset to think across worldviews, across disciplines and to think alongside artists to imagine these digital futures that are liberatory, communally responsive and expansively inclusive.

And on that note, I am very pleased to host our event today on the theme “Navigating Digital Capitalism,” where we will discuss digital platforms and their expanding grip on our relationships and culture, while also providing speculations on the future of artistic practice and how our guests envision small acts of resistance in our everyday lives.

Through their respective practices and experiences working with digital technologies, from social media to AI, our two speakers will touch on the questions: How do we navigate—or undermine—digital capitalism’s systems that are so deeply embedded within our society? And what are the more ethical and community-oriented alternatives to what digital capitalism proposes?

So, without further ado, I am thrilled to introduce [Luisa Ji](#), who is a creative strategist and cultural producer working at the intersection of public imagination, digital transformation and systems of care. With over a decade of global experience, she leads participatory programs that use storytelling, worldbuilding, and culturally specific technological adaptations to help institutions navigate cultural and ecological volatility. From projects like *Intelligent Terrain*, *Cultural Technologies Lab*, and *Goblin Market*, Luisa Ji has turned abstract questions into embodied experiences that guide artists, cultural practitioners, and the public in their exploration of AI, technology’s ecological impact, cooperations under scarcity, and more. These projects are curious inquiries into how people engage with lived environments rather than making arbitrary distinctions between culture and nature. As the Studio Director at [UKAI Projects](#), Luisa has delivered initiatives in Canada, South Korea, Iceland, Taiwan, the UK, and more, supporting artists and arts organizations in transforming their practices.

As well, we have with us today [Tristan Sauer](#), who is a new media artist and curator critically interested in the relationship between technology and capitalism. His work

navigates the intersections between our digital and physical worlds, and what an inside-out look at our relationships with technology can reveal about the human condition. Working in multiple mediums but most closely with physical computing, sculpture and extended reality, Sauer often explores these topics through an Afrofuturist lens, imagining and critiquing technocapitalism's impacts on our present and future realities.

Before I hand things off to Luisa to start things off, there's a couple of housekeeping items I'd like to go over. Number one, today's event will be comprised of two short thematic presentations, followed by a conversation between Luisa and Tristan. Following the conversation, there will be time for a question-and-answer period, so please save your questions until the end. I'd also like to mention that the session is being recorded, and it's being recorded in speaker mode, so only those of you who speak will be recorded. And finally, I ask that you keep your microphones muted during the presentations unless you're asking a question during the Q&A period. If you don't feel comfortable being in the recording, you're welcome to keep your video off and/or to submit your question in the chat box and I'll read it out loud on your behalf.

So, I'll pass it over to Luisa, take it away.

[Note: Unfortunately, approx. thirty seconds of the recording are missing here.]

**Luisa Ji:** So, and hopefully by the end of it, it maybe feels a little more hopeful and it doesn't have to look like resignation from doing anything. So, about UKAI Projects. We really love the idea of having embodied, felt experiences. We are human, we are here to feel, we are here to experience the world. A lot of the arts and culture that we encounter positions us as spectators among these spectacles, and we hope to move the dial a little every single time we create a project. And we hope to see more people working on arts and cultural activities that bring people along. About UKAI Projects, we have been around for a little bit and since last year, we are run by myself, Benjamin Lappalainen, who's in the middle there, and Husna Farooqui. We have since travelled to Taiwan, and we have developed participatory projects with people that we really haven't met and who speak different languages. And that experience is built onto how we understand public life, and how art and culture transcends that language—and creates a better relationship, which is important in this talk as well.

Capitalism doesn't really want you to have friends. What it does is, labour replaces social obligations. So, you used to ask your friends for an airport ride, and now you call an Uber. Aesthetics without commitment. You see cottagecore, but you don't really touch dirt anymore. Industry standard: monopoly. Your nightlife is owned by Pioneer and its parent corporation (the DJing platform). So, there's really a lot of social relationships and social fabric that's being replaced by something that money can buy. And a lot of these things are very cheap. So, there's no way that your ChatGPT subscription, assuming that you have one,

is in any form paying for the true cost of computing power. None of these tools are turning a profit from their services yet. So, what's free is really just building up dependency onto these platforms. And cheap undercuts the relational alternatives. So, think about your local coffee shop that's closing because everything is . . . all the social interactions are moved online. Or your local record shop that is failing to stay alive because everyone has switched to online streaming. We can cancel Spotify, but that doesn't undo the harm that it's already done to our social fabric. So, we have to do more to bring the social fabric back to life. So, what cheap really does is make it harder to imagine life without the convenience of, say, an Uber ride or a DoorDash order, and it makes participatory, well, it makes participation compulsory, so we cannot leave.

More recently, I've started seeing this meme that's going around: "I'm in a very Chinese time of my life." I have always been in a very Chinese time of my life, as you can see. But seeing this really brings me to something uncomfortable, which is sort of this participation in a culture through the internet, through something that's so nebulous but without a commitment to the complexities of this culture. So, being a Chinese person my whole life, seeing all of a sudden everyone is doing the things that, you know, I used to be made fun of for, or things that used to look just weird in the Western context, being adopted so readily in these short-lived cycles of memes online. That is a very uncomfortable time. But what it does, really, is to make it, to normalize this feeling that you can adopt a culture without fully committing to the care, the maintenance, the making of the culture. So, industry standard. I know we have to work and live on the internet now, and a lot of things that we use are imposed on us as industry standards. Microsoft, Adobe, the Zoom that we're on right now—and there's really no exit. So, when it comes to AI, the term "NVIDIA State" got thrown around recently a lot. I think it's very telling of what is going on. The company holds, you know, the major, major share of AI hardware, and almost everyone uses the strategy of bundling their services to get more and more people onto the platform. So, we are already on Microsoft. We are already using Google. We are already using many, many cloud-enabled software, like Adobe, Meta. Where does it go? So, our workflows, our institutions, our entire industry runs on this software. So, we are no longer a customer making a choice, choosing our tools; we are participating in this system without a choice. And the cloud is really just somebody's computer. In this case, AWS [Amazon Web Services], Microsoft, Google, and everyone else with a dramatically smaller share. And that's where the snake eats its tail. What we are paying for, in cheap, we pay for anyways elsewhere. A lot of these projects are sold to us, or sold to our leaders, as economic growth or innovation, which makes it easier for them to justify getting subsidies and tax credits and other forms of public funding. For example, us paying for our utility bills.

And where does AI fit? It really is good old capitalism with a shiny new armour, and it's this new darling as we squeeze ourselves into labour with no rights, relationships with no reciprocity, and enclosure with no exit. Everyone tells you that you can use AI to get ahead,

but studies show otherwise. What this does, according to this *Forbes* article, is that more freelancers have been brought into the workforce to fill these gaps in the increased demand, outpacing full-time employees. That triggers a cascade of problems when it comes to labour and when it comes to our own productivity. But this is not really kind of the main point of this presentation. A lot of people are asking questions around, you know, how are artists participating in the boom of AI? I personally think that everything that's about the IP [intellectual property] theft is really a misdirection. What we are facing more urgently is that we're still talking about art being property. We're still talking about art being a creative output. And we're still focussing on the extraction that is essentially everywhere. So, how do we break out of this? The bigger theft is the fragmentation of the shared public imagination, because nobody really owns it. And nobody is, I guess, feeling that they must organize to protect it. But this is where we need it the most: in our social fabric.

So, the solution is really the friends we make along the way. And I don't mean that in a sort of very oversimplified manner. I think friendship is infrastructure. I think social, local social networks, third spaces, making your digital garden, creating or becoming a contributor to local internet subcultures in a very, very committed way, [these activities] are building solid ground that we can [use to] defend against the financialization of our online lives and offline lives. So, one of the examples that I use all the time is sort of like this home-to-homeland, which is like a LAN party that encourages people to bring technologies, their laptops, tablets from different eras and attempt to run games together. So, what people learn at the end of the day is that they learn how different versioning works, they help each other troubleshoot, and hopefully—hopefully—at the end of the day, they do get to play games together. So, these are tangible ways of building local capacity for, you know, resisting some part of this financialization of your social life and online lives.

So, this is it for me today. I'll pass it to Tristan.

**Tristan Sauer:** Thanks so much, Luisa. Just give me one second. You can all see that? Sweet. Yeah. Thanks again, Luisa. That was really, really interesting. My name is Tristan, Tristan Sauer. I'm a new media artist and curator, based here in Toronto, Canada. I'm going to talk a little bit about my own practice in relation to a lot of these concepts and how capitalism has informed the way that I work and the way that I engage with technology. As mentioned, I'm primarily a new media artist and a curator, so all of my work is conceptually and critically engaged with technology in a way that I use it as both the medium and the subject of my work. It's kind of like using technology as a mirror to point in on itself, and explore how our relationships with it affect our relationships with the world, with society, and how the intersections of capitalism and technology sort of operate as a Pandora's box of sorts, questioning, like, how far we've gone and what we can still afford to put back or what we have to live with now.

My largest project to date has been working with a series of wearable technologies. This was a project I created back in 2024 called, *Your Life Matters*. That was a series of functional, wearable protest gear that protesters could wear into the streets to navigate real police interactions. The idea of it came about in 2020 during the Black Lives Matter protests, at a time when we were seeing an uptake in the ways that surveillance technology and other large online tools were being used specifically to target and arrest protesters and other demonstrators in the streets of major cities like New York. And the sort of, like, relinquishing of control and power that the public had in the face of a lot of these technologies finally falling into the hands of law enforcement. It started with a mask that I created that monitored the CO2 levels of its wearer. When those levels would fall below a certain level, the mask would audibly play "I can't breathe" over and over again until they returned to normal levels. And then it sort of grew into a larger body of work. At the time, I was really interested in the pervasive use of facial recognition technology that had been co-opted into things like CCTV camera and even in some cases onto police body cams, and how that was used to track down protesters after they had been at these events. But also in specifically how the bias that was baked into the training of the algorithms that controlled this technology was proven time and again, time and again, to be inherently racist and sexist, working much poorer on Black faces and Indigenous faces and the faces of women, and being much better and much more forgiving for the faces of people who are white men. Which was a clear indication of who was controlling this data and who was creating these technologies, who was putting them out there into the world, and who was safe in the hands of these technologies. This was the work displayed at Nuit Blanche in 2024.

A lot of this came from the fact that I feel like I grew up in a time on the internet where doors felt more open, where the internet felt like a more accessible, navigateable and editable space. My, like, first real social media platform of any kind was Tumblr. I couldn't actually find my old Tumblr page anymore. It's sort of been lost to time. But I have very vivid memories of, like, breaking into the HTML in the background of Tumblr, which was also common in other sites like Neopets, I think, at the time. And I feel like it's a great example of ways that the internet used to allow us and used to encourage us to break and share and kind of like, not even hack, but willingly just open the back door into these larger systems that we navigated. And it's slowly become more and more obfuscated and less accessible and less customizable as we've moved forward into our time. I also used to regularly visit The Million Dollar Homepage, which was sort of one of the first examples, I think, of a larger concept I'll dive into about ownership of the internet and ownership of, like, digital land and space. For anyone who isn't aware of what this page was, it was a page with a million pixels where each pixel could be purchased for a dollar. It kind of quickly became overrun by ads and sort of like early gif art and other things like that. And it still lives on today, though it has fallen severely to what is called "link rot". So, I think if you go on it, over forty percent of the links that exist on this page now are dead. They go nowhere. But the page is still there. And I even took a crack at kind of, like, carving out my own space on the internet for a while. I ran

an online gallery platform called Symbiocene Gallery, where I would curate net art that was specifically for display on the web. This sort of came about in the pandemic when physical gallery spaces weren't accessible, but I was really interested in exploring what online spaces had that made them unique that couldn't be replicated in the physical world. This was all to say that, all of this sort of encompassed larger thoughts that I was having at the time about data and ownership and the concepts around digital land online. This was an article that I wrote shortly after graduating, called "Data Monarchs and the Power Dynamics of the internet," where I sort of drew parallels between large tech billionaires, like Mark Zuckerberg here, and the concept of royal monarchies and land ownership in a way of royalty, and how the powers that exist within those structures are largely unelected. There's a quote from the article: "The internet functions a lot like our own world. There's no entity that unanimously owns the internet," no countries or organizations, but it's all sort of charted up like plots of land. That gets even more true when you look at things like country-specific domains. But more and more we're seeing—like the graph that Luisa had shown in her presentation—about how, you know, things like AWS, which is run by Amazon, that runs the hosting of most of the internet, a large majority of it, how you can draw real parallels between that in the ways that land used to be owned by sort of, like, feudal lords. At the time of the writing of this article, *Forbes* had listed these four tech billionaires [Jeff Bezos, Bill Gates, Larry Page, Mark Zuckerberg] in a ranking of the most powerful people in the world. I'm sure this would not really be the same today. Elon Musk, I'm sure, would find himself up here, and Larry Page no longer works for Google. So, I'm sure things would be shifted around. But even back in 2020, there was already a real understanding that power no longer necessarily had to be held by people who were in elected states. The most powerful person on this list at the time was Xi Jinping. But there was a real sort of global understanding and understanding of myself that power in an unelected sense really did fall towards who controlled data and who controlled online spaces, who controlled technology, and how unchecked and how regulated a lot of that had really become. You know, this really kind of peaked, I think, when we saw a whole threshold of these tech billionaires congregate at Trump's inauguration. Here seeing, like, the Google CEO, Mark Zuckerberg, Jeff Bezos, and others. And the sort of, like, centralization of tech amongst the ultra-rich and amongst what we view as power in the world. And yeah, further just kind of drawing questions between, more and more, about how unelected a lot of this power is. Especially when we then saw people like Elon Musk enter actual political spheres and have real influence over them, buying out spaces like Twitter, turning it into X, and then being in the White House and having political influence while never actually running on a ballot. This, of course, these were all concepts that at the time were actually unknown to me, but had been spoken about in times before, through concepts such as technofeudalism, written by Cédric Durand and Yanis Varoufakis, basically just drawing parallels once again between feudalism and the way that our online spheres

run.<sup>1</sup> This, of course, was also printed at the time because the Metasphere was still alive, rest in peace. For those who weren't aware, it was officially axed, I think, two days ago, at this time, after pumping about eighty billion dollars into the project. I was almost a little sad to see it go, not because I wanted to see more of, like, Meta's control over the internet, but because I think there was at least an attempt in the Metasphere, for the internet to be a place that we, like, hang out in. That maybe was ala a lot of early MMOs [massive multiplayer online games] like *Second Life*—if not worse, and still controlled by a large corporation, but it was definitely a bit ironic to see, you know, what was posed to us as the future of our world finally kind of just, like, go down the toilet.

I've spoken about concepts like this in quite a bit of my work. This is a project that I worked on with an artist, Andrea Josic, called *Ode to a Digital Childhood* (2022), where we explored the very idea of what it was like to be someone who grew up online in the time when the internet was a lot more free, and a lot more accessible. We created this vending machine, where you could buy QR codes to a list of curated websites that we had designed as sort of free sources, or free, ideas of freedom on the internet, free sharing. Some of my favourites were, oh, this is an example of an earlier project I'd made with the same vending machine, called *Black Power for Sale*, where I was selling 3D prints of examples of symbols of Black power inside of the vending machine. [This is] kind of just showing that a lot of my practice has been involved with ways that capitalism involves itself in social movements, both physically and online. But a few of my favourites that we included were things like the Model Resource, which is a great wiki page that scrapes 3D models from video games and other online and digital platforms and makes them accessible. If you're into game creation or 3D modelling, you can find textures and models from all sorts of your favourite retro games on here. I use it all the time. This is Radio Garden, which lets you tap into radio frequencies from all over the world. You can just listen to radio broadcasts from almost anywhere on the globe that is accessible. And Wikibooks, which is just like a great resource for finding books and textbooks and citations that are edited by the community. I think a lot of what I was trying to get at with a lot of these projects was that sharing is a radical act, that in a time where the internet is more and more paywalled, where we are expected to pay to be online, and where our data is mined, where we are the products of a lot of these corporations, using the internet in a way that it was sort of maybe not intended to, but used to in its original days—to share and to create community and to just provide resources to others without the expectation of capital return—is a radical act in these times. It doesn't

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<sup>1</sup> Cédric Durand, *How Silicon Valley Unleashed Techno-feudalism: The Making of the Digital Economy*, translated by David Broder (Verso Books, 2024); Yanis Varoufakis, *Technofeudalism: What Killed Capitalism* (Melville House, 2024).

necessarily feel that way, but it definitely can be, and is in many ways, when more and more there are more and more efforts to limit our ability to do that online.

Around this time too I got really interested into the world of digital, virtual influencers, Lil Miquela being the most pervasive and well known of them. These are influencers who exist online who are not real people but are, like, completely generated, usually through some sort of, like, 3D modelling software, but still hold real social media presences. Lil Miquela does, like, brand deals and takes photos with real people and acts like a real person for all intents and purposes. The one who I became most interested at the time, though, was Shudu, who markets herself as the first supermodel, first virtual supermodel in the world. I was primarily interested over the fact that Shudu's creator is not Black but is a male-presenting white artist, and what that meant for the creation of digital beings and digital identity online, when we were sort of obfuscating that through lenses that allowed people to be almost transracial on the internet—and to, like, live and embody the body of a racialized digital being without ever actually living in the identity of that being. Shudu has also gone on to move away from being a primarily 3D modelled character to being primarily AI generated. She considers herself an Open AI ambassador and has even been on the cover of Vogue as a giant in AI. A lot of her more recent examples online are all AI generated. This is actually an ad that she did for an AI-influencer “face cream,” that gives pores to AI influencers. And yeah, it has just sort of like moved completely into being a completely AI-generated being nowadays. Which comes with a whole other slew of complicated feelings about how AI's implicit biases, how that might affect the creation of Black bodies, in this case, and what exactly this means in terms of the creator's intentions and how this is handled and her interactions with the public. All of this really culminated for me in sort of a tipping point that happened on the internet in 2024, where we saw bot traffic outweigh human traffic on the internet for the first time in human history. And human traffic on the internet, as of 2024, only makes about forty-nine percent of all internet traffic, while bots make up about fifty-one percent. It's broken up into this definition, sort of arbitrary, between good bots and bad bots. Good bots are basically bots that are like scrapers, things like that the Internet Archive uses, bots that we generally consider to be beneficial for our time online. And bad bots are things that, like, steal your data and create targeted ads for you, which, as you can see, do make up more of the internet than good bots. This all really had me interested in a sort of, like, internet conspiracy theory that hasn't been talked about for a really long time, called the dead internet theory. For those of you who don't know it, the dead internet theory is, as I said, a conspiracy theory that exists online about how the internet is dead and how it's just been replaced by a series of bots and AI content, and no one's really on it anymore. We can see that with the rise of things like AI slop, which has been heavily critiqued by artists for sort of, like, robbing the very integrity of what art is from it. And, I'll skim over this a bit just because Luisa mentioned it as well, but this sort of, like, ouroboros experience that is happening right now, where AI is almost eating its own tail and generating more and more of this, like, garbage online, creating potential model collapse where it will no longer be able

to even be useful. These are just a few examples of things—I'm a little over time so I'll skim through them—but that are places that AI has been kind of, like, generating further slop. But all of that really culminated in this exhibition that I made earlier this year, called *Soft Internet Theory*, where I've been exploring the ideas of how to oppose the dead internet theory through resistance, through the idea of bringing humanity back to the digital. All of the artists that I curated in the show explore digital realms or digital tools in ways that provide intimacy or human connection back into them. The main one that I wanted to bring up at the end of this, was this work by Shihab Mian called *WISP* (2022), which was a work in the show that was two computers that sent messages to each other at the speed of the wind outside. When Shihab and I talked about the work, we talked a lot about technology at the dull edge instead of the cutting edge, which I think is one of the ways that we can really resist a lot of the hyper-efficiency models that we're pushed on by things like AI. Other artists like Imogen Clendening, who have created solar-servered websites, *Low-tech Magazine*, who runs their entire website off a solar server, or websites like The Solar Protocol, who also run their entire website off solar servers and run by this idea of a natural intelligence instead of an artificial one, where our tech is more tied to a natural world and more tied to just, yeah, natural processes. I think, like, it really brings into question conversations about Luddism again, and how we can choose to pull back and engage with technologies in ways that don't call for them to be efficient and can be kind of viewed and experienced in ways that are slower and softer and more ingrained with natural processes and human connection. And I think just stepping back and resisting our need to be kind of always pushing forward and being at the forefront of all these things can be ways that we can, like, slow our roll into sort of an inevitable kind of like AI hellscape in many ways. Yeah, and I'll kind of cut it there so we have time to do the Q&A. Thank you.

**Danuta:** Amazing. Thank you both, Tristan and Luisa, for your presentations. There's lots of food for thought there that we'll hopefully get to unpack a little bit during this artist Q&A session. During this part of the session, both Luisa and Tristan have submitted questions that they would like to respond to and discuss with each other. So, I'll be asking them on their behalf. We'll get started with the first question: In what ways have you personally benefited from AI? And maybe, I don't know, Tristan, you're in front of me right now, so do you want to start first?

**Tristan:** Yeah, that's a good one—personally benefited from it. I think lately I've been in a real, like, avoidant stage of using AI at all. So, there have been very little moments in my recent history where I think I have personally benefited from it. But, I think, I do acknowledge the fact that there are ways that the technologies can help, especially in terms of, like, accessibility online and the sort of navigation of the internet and the compiling of data in really, like, clean and useful forms. I did use it sometime last year when I was researching programs to go to grad school. It's really hard to find lists of MFA programs in the world that pertain to, like, super niche interests in media arts. So I did rely on a ChatGPT list

at the time, to try to find ways that I could—just programs that I could apply to. And it was more, way more, efficient to me than using a Google search. So, that might be something that maybe I personally benefitted there, that definitely saved me a lot of time in my search in it. But, yeah, I don't really use AI much in my day-to-day life these days, so I don't have a strong answer for that. But if something comes to mind, I'll jump back in.

**Danuta:** Cool. Luisa, did you want to jump in?

**Luisa:** Yeah. I was writing something in both English and Chinese last year towards organizing a Goblin Market in Hsinchu. So that entire process was made so much easier by using Claude and ChatGPT concurrently. I do notice that one writes not just, like, better, but one writes more elaborately than the other. It's just one has, like, more literary kind of finesse to it. So going back and forth really helps me kind of understand, okay, well where I can cut something, or, like, how do the two languages kind of riff off each other. So that was very interesting. And on top of that, it was, like, facilitating conversations in both languages. So that kind of, I mean, it is a productivity hack in the sense that I didn't have to, you know, spend another two, three thousand dollars on a translator/interpreter. But, on the other hand, it is, again, like, eroding this collaborative spirit between, like, if I were to work with another person and we both kind of have this understanding of local context and the language context. So, yeah, that's something that I feel like I have lost from using something that effectively helped me navigate not having enough budget to hire someone, or not having enough time to do proper kind of translation. So, yeah, like, I do find that as maybe a personal gain at the expense of everyone else who's working in translation. Or yeah, or just, like, the amount of water that I've used in that process.

**Tristan:** I have a similar experience because I'm trying to learn German lately, and my dad is a native German speaker, but he has a really hard time explaining German context to me, because it's hard to explain how language works when you're a native speaker. So, I've dipped into using AI a few times to kind of ask him more, I don't know, specific questions. But yeah, I wish I could just be more patient with his ability to explain it to me.

**Luisa:** Yeah, so that was interesting. I think also what I've noticed is that cataloguing things became so much easier, but the work that you put in afterwards to verify if, you know, the web browser tools have done a good job, that is really rendering the efficiency kind of useless. But you feel better, you do feel better when your information is kind of assumed to be placed in a cleaner format. So, I don't know. I don't know—personally benefit, [but] short term.

**Danuta:** Kind of riffing off of all of that, when we're starting to think about how artists come into this conversation around AI, what do you think the role that artists play, if any, is in exploring and understanding AI? Like, what do you think they can offer in this context?

**Tristan:** Yeah, I mean, I think, yeah, this is something I've thought about a bunch in the fact that, as somebody who's been slightly AI avoidant, I do often think about how as artists it is sort of, you know, it's not a written rule or anything, but it feels like a lot of times it's our job to explore new frontiers, kind of like on behalf of society in a way. Artists are often the people who hack and break and experiment and do with things and find ways that they are beneficial to society, the way that they harm society, the ways that we can manipulate and rehash and reuse tools. That's something that is unique to the artist experience and the way that artists work. And so, AI is one of those tools that is, like, here and exists and is around. And so I think as artists, like, it's, I think it's still beneficial that there are some of us who are exploring ways that, exploring ways that AI will be—just exploring how AI will be a part of the future of our world, and what that means and how we can prepare for certain falloffs that it might create, prepare for realities in which we're living with it, and still, like, break and manipulate those tools to be for the benefit of users. I genuinely believe artists are sort of the people who will do that, not the companies who kind of like orchestrate more—or who are orchestrating these tools just to generate more profit, or to be efficiency tools. Artists will always find ways to sort of like subvert the intended use of something like that. So, that's sort of how I view the, yeah, the role of artists in AI at the moment.

**Luisa:** Yeah, I think also in the context of Canadian arts and culture, it is majority funded by public dollars. So, there is this obligation of, you know, public good or, like how does art fit into this broader scale of democracy? So, I think artists, I mean, I think a lot of artists would do that regardless, like with or without funding. But I think there is this strong element of [asking] how do we engage with the system so that our democracy is still intact, so that our social fabric is still intact? And where it has been observed, like, with harm? So, for example, you know, the mainstream is really suffering from a lot of the digitization of the economy. So, how do we as artists bring a lot of these places that we conventionally consider third spaces back into our social fabric? Because I think digital capitalism is powerful in a way that it accelerates this fragmentation of our relationships. So, a lot of people are—I think Canadian youth have reported to have worse mental state this year in comparison to last year, and that gap is growing. And a lot of that comes from loneliness and losing that connection to kind of their immediate environment. So, yeah, I think artists have both the responsibility to interrogate these systems and also the responsibility to build back the infrastructure that we need.

**Danuta:** Amazing. Alright, next question. I know Luisa really wanted to hear this answer: what's on your "For You" page on your social media, I guess? Is that where that is? Like, the recommendations of your algorithm and, like what kind of targeted ads might you be getting?

**Luisa:** Well, I will throw myself under the bus now. I have been getting, like, submarine ads. So Thyssen Krupp, I forget, like, the German manufacturer of a lot of elevators and heavy

machinery. And also, Hanwha, yeah, the shipbuilding [company] from South Korea. They are competing over a contract currently, so I think I might have been getting that just by, you know, proximity to where our local leaders are. Yeah, and then I think my “For You” page on IG has just been, you know, a lot of Chinese content. So, I’m a heavy kind of victim of that Chinese trend—and cats. What else do I have? A lot of slop, actually. Like, I think there’s a lot of, yeah, like a lot of AI-generated slides, and because I am using these tools in my personal life, so I have very—it takes one to know one kind of. So, I do think that [dead] internet theory is real, but I don’t think people are fully falling into that trap. What’s yours, what’s your “For You” page?

**Tristan:** Yeah, I’m scrolling through it right now. The targeted ads I’m getting are for—I mentioned before this call that my car had broken down—so most of the targeted ads I’m getting are for car removal services. So, that’s fun. Other than that, also a lot of slop on my actual “For You” page, sort of like a lot of, like, AI-generated home decor contents. I feel like I get that a lot now, apartment home decor content. And then recently sort of ASMR soldering videos have been a big one that I’ve also been seeing. Yeah, sort of like aesthetic, motherboard-stripping videos of people removing microchips from motherboards, but, like, in a way that looks fun. I’m not really sure what that means. I don’t know what they’re trying to sell me, but I am seeing it.

**Danuta:** I get a lot of cat videos, that’s just me. Alright. So, maybe we’ll ask one more question, then we’ll head into the audience Q&A. So, just to kind of see if there are any examples of non-capitalist systems that you’ve seen that exist in the digital or online; are there any kind of things that you’ve kind of come across that kind of maybe have that kind of non-capitalist underpinning to it? Because the algorithm does like to sell us a lot.

**Luisa:** Downloading, pirating. There are, I mean, tutorials, like free tutorials, like a lot of things that you find on, like, how to build your own server from home, that kind of thing. Like, people put that on the internet for free, with no interest in selling you another course. Although that’s diminishing as well. I think a lot of content is being sort of shifting towards, like, I will start doing a tutorial and then you buy other services. What else? I think people organizing online for offline activities, those kinds of things are, you know, healing in a certain way.

**Tristan:** Yeah, piracy for sure. I feel like I’ve seen a sort of uptick of it. Sites like Soul Seek that do peer-to-peer sharing of files. And even more recently, like as there has been sort of the Spotify exodus, platforms that will do online radios, or share genred sets, so that people can still find curated selections of music in replacement for things like the Spotify algorithm, which has kind of replaced a lot of the music creation or ways that people found music prior—which, honestly, I don’t even remember how I found music prior to that. And so, I think there’s been, yeah, kind of like a free resurgence in resources that are trying to bring a

lot that back. Yeah, in terms of organizing, like, I think there's a lot of cool examples there. One of the most fun ones I've seen in Toronto specifically is a group that does, that uses Instagram to promote techno walks, where you can meet up at specific locations in the city and then you just walk around and listen to techno with them. They also do no-tech walks, but those ones I've heard are only promoted on flyers in bathrooms. So, they're offline completely.

**Danuta:** Okay. Alright. Thank you both so much. We'll move into the Q&A session, if the audience has any questions, and I see there's one in the chat. So again, for anybody else, you can raise your digital hand using the Zoom controls in the toolbar, or if you don't feel comfortable being in the recording, you're welcome to submit your question in the chat box and I'll read it out loud. So, we have the question in the chat: Do either of you train or build your own machine-learning, if not AI systems, or even do data analysis?

**Tristan:** I personally have never trained my own model. I've looked into downloading trainable offline models that you can kind of do, like, locally on your own computer for specific art pieces that I've wanted to work on, but I've never, yeah, I've never worked with the technology like that before.

**Luisa:** Yeah, me neither. I'm, like, always using the out-of-the-box. I guess in my day-to-day operating, I never encountered a use case that I would actually benefit from it. Mostly just, like, Excel is enough.

**Danuta:** I think it would be a lot of work to maybe train that, and you probably have to have quite a substantial data set as well, I would imagine. I hope that answered the question. Great. Thank you. Are there any other questions for Tristan and Luisa while we have them?

Okay, well, I will ask another question of you guys. Maybe, kind of, I know we kind of talked a little bit about this during both of your presentations, but what are some final recommendations for people to kind of escape the very heavy doom feeling of the digital capitalist space? And what are some ways that we can resist the technofeudalism of being both online and offline? Like, what are some final thoughts for people?

**Tristan:** Yeah, I think just, I don't know, yeah, get offline, get outside, leave, you know, take a break from your online echo chamber. Try to engage with real community, try to foster community, try to find community, be in it. I think, yeah, don't be afraid to just try to move slower. I know that the whole point of a lot of these systems is that they force us to move fast, but in any ways that you can, I think if we make concerted efforts to do things the hard way and to, like, use our brains instead of relying on automated tools, we pose to keep a lot more. There's this great study that I feel like is cited all the time, about London cab drivers who had larger sections of their brains that were associated with navigation than people

who were just in the regular population. And I know that, like, I'm a person who is, like, extremely directionally challenged, because I use the GPS all the time. I think I worry about what more we'll lose, as we rely more and more on AI. And so I think just, like, choosing to hold onto your skills, like your ability to write, your other forms of management, and just, like, choosing to do it slightly harder and have control over those outputs, I think that can bring a lot of solace and peace.

**Luisa:** On my end, I think everyone should try to start a business that builds back what has been undercut by a lot of the, like the cheaper, subscription-based software. So, if music is important to you—you know, maybe business is not really the right word—but sort of building a place where people can actually have these exchanges and provide each other some sort of communal either obligations or value that helps you buy that relation back from the big tech. I feel like that's very valuable. Again, I think rebuilding an economy that's built upon the people-to-people relationship, even though it might be mediated by, say, a website or even, you know, multiple AI tools that you choose to use. As long as you're making a conscious choice into, hey, I'm making this available to my community, my skillsets, my ability to navigate the map, that kind of thing. And reassigning some sort of communal value to it. Like, I think, are there ways that we can turn our brain from, "hey, this is a fifteen dollar subscription a month," into "I would rather put fifteen dollars into buying an album from an artist, or go to an art show, or buying a print from a print artist." And kind of rewiring our brain into investing in local sustainable networks.

**Tristan:** Very much agreed.

**Danuta:** Well, this has been absolutely amazing. Thank you all so much. This has been, yeah, a fantastic conversation, and I think it's left us all with many things to consider about the pervasiveness of digital capitalism, the systems that it's kind of embedded in, and how we can resist it and find alternatives. And to everyone out there on the Zoom who's watching, I wanted to say thank you as well for attending, and I hope you'll join us for future events in the series. The video recording will be posted to Agnes's website in the coming weeks on Digital Agnes, and it will be accompanied by a PDF resource that will provide opportunities for further reflection and reading around the themes discussed today.

I also wanted to acknowledge our funding for this program through the Canada Council for the Arts and the George Taylor Richardson Memorial Fund at Queen's University. If you would like to keep apprised of other events in the series at Agnes, you can follow us on social media and/or sign up for Agnes's newsletter and also follow both of these amazing people here if you want to find out more about what they're doing. Thank you all, and I hope you have a really wonderful afternoon.