

IMMATERIAL

LABOUR

UNION

IMMATE-
REALITY

#10

Editors' Note

Lidia Pereira and Δεριζαματζορ Προμπλεμ Ιναυστραλια

Welcome to the 10th issue of the Immaterial Labour Union zine, which will also be the last one under such name. In order not only to mark this occasion, but also to justify the name change, we will be looking at the often hidden layers behind the term "Immateriality". Thus, and as we wrote in our call for submissions, this issue will hopefully serve as a bridge towards the renaming of the project into an alternative that doesn't erase the material realities of media and so-called immaterial labour. With that in mind, on her submission for this issue, co-editor and founder Lídia Pereira attempts a proposal for the new name, as well as provides a background for the origin of the previous name, reviewing its problems and inadequacies.

BrowserBased Group's contribution explores how older network infrastructures become platforms for urban communication and are characterized by a jump out of their expected use.

Niek Hilkmann's allegorical tale confronts us with the sustenance of the physical body of the "immaterial" producer, whose crippled state (a consequence of his endeavours to stay alive) ultimately allows him to flourish as an artist.

Marloes de Valk's article explores our self-documentation excesses within the context of digital economy, underlining the hidden physical nature of apparently immaterial data and the destructive consequences it poses for health, safety and the environment.

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BrowserBased Group, Lídia Pereira, Marloes de Valk, Niek Hilkmann, Simone Cassiani

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The scale on this issue's cover is based off a design by joyzine².

1: <https://www.gnu.org/licenses/fdl-1.3.en.html>

2: <https://www.vecteezy.com/vector-art/128341-lady-justice-free-vector-pack-vol-2>

Cloud Gazing

Lidia Pereira



Tether

Simone Cassiani

Free floating and all is empty
Yet this emptiness is mine
Mined for pleasure or for profit
Intensity of worlds sublime.
Sublimated into existence,
spiritual and light as time.
Free floating, but in this silence
(Silence, you're no longer mine)
I can feel the fumes of acid,
The disease spread from the slime
Electronic cries for mercy
Bodies slaving in the mine.

Twisted carnival of appearances
Ethereal voices sink to the ground
No longer am I free floating
Heavy cables have us bound.

69.numbers.suck

BrowserBased Group



A phone-booth in Athens, Greece. The phone doesn't work, the line is dead. The standing booth bares traces of other communications.

Let's attempt a reading in accordance with local scripture, from left to right, top to bottom. But where to start? What is legible? What is deleted? What was never intended as a message?

Top left: a clear start. Handwritten with green felt marker: A cell-phone number (they all start with 69 in Greece), the word GAY in capitals, and under fuckmy (*italics mine*).

A bit to the right, on the silver panel: a smudge ending with the numbers 001. Handwritten with black marker.

Following the black line towards the centre: The word NTINOS (a name, short for Konstantinos) partially erased. Below it, written by the same hand, partially erased by another: a number starting

with 69 becomes an indecipherable smudge. Then a barely legible word: Masaz.

Following the black line downwards to the number starting with 694060[smudge]1.

Top right: a less clear start. A full sentence in capitals: **EIMAI ΑΓΟΡΙ ΚΑΝΩ ΠΙΠΕΣ**. Translation: I am a boy I do blowjobs. Below it a number starting with 69[smudge]528

Directly below it, with a marker of the same colour and similar fuzziness to the smudge above, the numbers 6981. And next to it, by a finer marker and hand, a complete 10-digit cellphone number: 6981719528

We can now recognise the same sentence written below, even though, it's partially covered by a partially removed sticker. And once again under it, this time obscured by a thick black smudge.

Is that the same marker that writes the next number below? 6946081991. Some numbers appear to be extended by another hand, with another marker. Below, the word Masaz, followed by the name Manos, clearly by the same writing hand.

Below, the number 69406. Interrupted? Once more, directly under, 064060[smudge]. Again interrupted? By another hand, at another moment in time. Finally, written over an area of the panel where the yellow paint has flaked off leaving a bare metal surface, the number complete: 6940601001 An arrow links it to its author's (?) name and service: Manos, Masaz.

The partially removed sticker in the centre reads (translation from Greek): KOKA KOLA √ produced in Bulgaria √ consumed in Greece √ taxed in Switzerland. Take part in the boycott.

Below the remains of the sticker, still on the silver panel, handwritten with black marker, both erased and smudged over by other black markers, barely decipherable numbers and text ending in the name NTINOS.



Ntinos has apparently not been around recently.

On the phone device: ANTREAS 6975273[smudge] Massaz (with double S).

And while we're at the phone, let's look at another group of dubiously deliberate smudges: the dial buttons. But only the ones that feature(d) numbers. Except of the number 4...

4, the number of rows and columns on the dial panel.

Perhaps we can now attempt a reading of the smudges. Are they signs or traces? Signal and noise. Canvas priming and final touches.



TYPES OF SMUDGES AND OTHER FUDGES

Type 1: There have been attempts to clean the booths. These have produced the large vague areas of faded black ink. These cover more or less the entire background on some booths.

Type 2: These are smaller, more contained areas of blurred and partially removed ink. They suggest more targeted attempts to erase certain writings. These may have been the result of a half-hearted cleaner or someone who was content with rendering (some) messages unreadable.

Type 3: These are distinct dark spots made with markers. They render messages unreadable by obscuring them. Their size corresponds to the area that they need to cover in order to obscure their target. In some cases, smudging over just a couple of numbers does the job. Smudges of this type are highly targeted and clearly deliberate. Their intention is not to clean booths but to dominate communications.

So far we distinguish two main categories: erasures and cover-ups. Two approaches, respectively, the subtractive and the additive. There is also a third approach: distortion.

Type 4: These are not smudges but graphic elements added to existing writings, like extensions, to distort their meaning. For example, the number 0, with a little line added becomes a 6, or a 1 becomes a 7, thus distorting the original phone number and producing a new one. Another example: ΧΡΗΣΗ ΑΥΓΗ (golden dawn) becomes ΧΡΗΣΑ ΑΥΓΑ (golden eggs).

In their freshly assigned role, the phone-booths re-enter the city's communication channels. They quote, from URLs of conspiracy theory videos to tags by local hooligans, all mingling with signs indecipherable (for most readers), with scrawls and smudges, and private messages, from romantic confessions to sexual services offered with names and mobile phone numbers. 69 is the prefix for commercial mobile networks in Greece which all work with real name bound accounts.

To get a closer look at these flows of messages, we documented phone-booths in various parts of the city. The result is a series of over 800 photographs, which, by their sheer number, asked for

some structure to be accessible. Using keywords, we arranged them by categories, into galleries at geolocations on openstreetmaps. We have come to regard most of the ones of sexual nature as advertisements for the simple reason of the frequency of their re-occurrence and frequency of updates all over the city. A frequency that even a most frantic wrath would fall short of to write, if the motivation was of a personal nature

Let's pause for the dilemma of motivations here: Are they indeed advertisements or are they meant to be outing people with their names and numbers, in a form of hate speech?

Since the numbers are mostly coupled to male names, we looked at legal aspects of male prostitution. There are contradictions concerning male sexwork in Greek law which make the legality of male sexwork unclear. This may very well contribute to the reasons for this thread of handwritten phenomena, next to the difficult to imagine levels of poverty and exposedness.¹





69.numbers.suck presents the documentation and our findings as offline maps. To protect the writers and their characters as best as we could we do not expose it online as a Google map gallery and we took the following steps.

Step one:

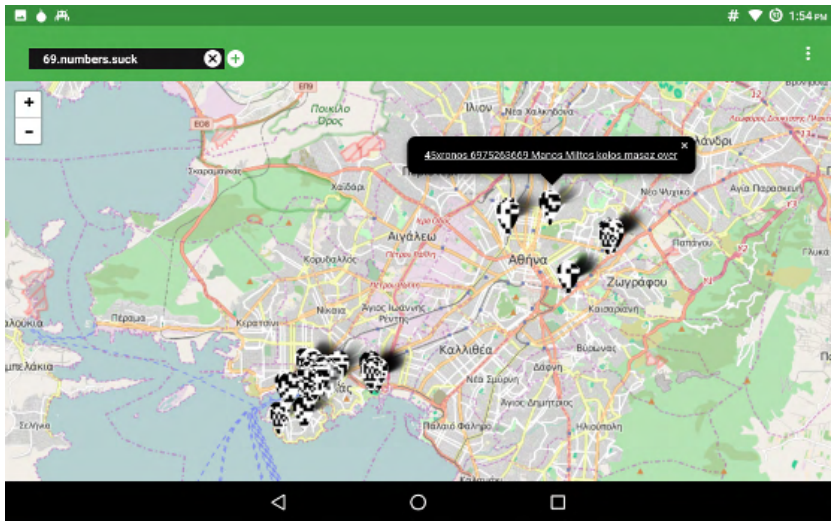
We present the 69 database only offline to lessen exposure to data mining or the scope of doxing. We serve 69.numbers.suck, locally, from an encrypted and modified wifi router that is toned down in range to limit wifi reception to the exhibition area.

Step two:

To have a recourse to the rule of law, even if weak, we copyrighted the database and the images to discourage unwanted reuse. The landing page also asks all visitors to observe the issue.

The request reads: "69.numbers.suck" is presented as an offline collection to keep a measure of protection from data crunchers. BrowserBased Group kindly requests you to refrain from reproducing and putting online any of this material! Further, the image files, the database and the resulting tracks are there for the sole purpose of consideration. Any data extraction, disclosure, dissemination or copying of content is prohibited without the authors' prior consent!

69.numbers.suck is a subjective overview and in no way is it all encompassing.



1: <http://www2.keelpno.gr/blog/?p=4934&lang=en>

From the piano, to the sawmill, and back again

Niek Hilkmann

Life sure can be a strange thing; sometimes it kicks you in the teeth with a bar of gold while you're lying face down on the floor. This happened to a friend of mine once. You would never be able to pick him out in a crowd. He dressed and behaved the same as everyone else, but he was actually an awfully talented pianist. Gee, did he love music! He grew up fantasizing about filling concerts halls one day, so he spent every hour he had practicing his skills. After years of study he graduated from the conservatory with some pretty decent grades. Still, this wasn't enough to land him a job as a musician. 'Get some experience first.' they said when he applied at the local orchestra. Therefore he kept rehearsing and played the public piano at the train station as often as he could. However, the study loan that the government had generously provided him during his studies needed to be paid back, so he went looking for a job on the side. 'What have you been doing all these years?' they asked him at the local coffee place after looking at his CV. 'Get some experience first.' It turned out no one wanted to hire a classical musician to do the dishes. Before long the pianist was out of money and down on his luck, so he replied to a vacancy at the sawmill. 'No skill or experience required.' it promised. However, the pianist cut off a finger with a saw blade on his very first day. He was quite upset about this, but the floor manager, a short man with a large beard and a tribal tattoo in his neck, assured him it was nothing to worry about: 'Just wrap some toilet paper around it and come back tomorrow.' He did, the next day and the day after, and all the while he kept playing the piano like a champ, kicking out Beethoven and Bach with only a tiny delay because of his missing index finger. The audience hardly noticed, either his handicap, or the performance in general. Time passed, until one random day, disaster struck again! My pianist friend hadn't slept in a week, practising all night for a big audition at the philharmonic that weekend, and of course, this had its consequences; Blood all over the floor, and the piano, one finger less, but no problem... He could still do it! He astonished friend and enemy with a tormented interpretation of Mozart at his audition, but alas... it was still

not enough to get him the job. The only thing he could do was to keep on playing, practising and working... And so he went, from the piano, to the sawmill, and back again. ZING! There went his little pinkie. BRUM-BRUM-BRRRRR! That was his thumb. WHER-WHER-WHER! No more ring finger (thankfully he had already sold the ring his mother left him at the pawn shop). After a couple of weeks he had no fingers left and playing Schubert was beyond the realm of possibilities... But what do you know? People loved to see him struggle with his bloody stubs on the keys! His screams of anguish were quite the turn-on for the artsy crowd who had never heard anything quite like it. Yes, somehow he had finally become the popular musician he always wanted to be. After becoming an overnight sensation, spawning several memes and sound-alikes, he signed a contract with a major label and never was poor again. So there you have it, keep working at it and your labour of love will surely pay off in the end!

The Eradication of History Or the Selling of Opportunities to Modify Behavior

Marloes de Valk

On an ominous Friday the 13th, February 2015, Google vice president and Chief Internet Evangelist Vint Cerf warned of a 'digital Dark Age'. According to Cerf, the digital heritage of the 21st century might very well become inaccessible to future generations. In an interview with BBC journalist Pallab Ghosh, Cerf shares his worries and mentions he is working on a solution to this new problem that, according to him, threatens to eradicate our history.

Data - even though it has a very immaterial ring to it - needs a physical carrier. This carrier has a limited lifespan. It might feel as if we've made incredible technological advances in the past seventy years, we still struggle to find a reliable one. Another obstacle on the road to long-term data storage is obsolescence. To maximize profits the industry has set a rapid pace for updates. Both the machines that host, the software that is used to create, and the formats to save the data are replaced. Which brings us to the economic factor, storing data is not cheap. It involves more than updating and maintaining hardware, you also have to keep the data retrievable and when it comes to large data sets this requires two pricey things: manpower and considerable amounts of electricity.

So we risk losing a lot, what to do? Cerf advises us to entrust our data to the cloud, there the experts can make sure it will survive the ages. But he has a vested interest. He works there. The solution Cerf is working on only addresses obsolescence, making sure the data can still be read. It doesn't address the problem of who has access to, and who has control over this data. Real clouds don't have owners, but Cerf's cloud does. It is owned by a company, owned by shareholders who are not known for their long term view or philanthropic mission. Next to that, Cerf wisely doesn't speak of who will extract something of value from this unfathomable amount of information, and for what purpose. After all, he is in the business of selling - to whoever is willing to pay - opportunities to influence people's behavior.

People run marathons with a High Definition video camera on their head, 400 hours of video are uploaded to YouTube every minute, and every day 95 million photos are added to Instagram, while there are 1.94 billion active monthly Facebook users. Friday March 31st 3,731,973,423 people were online. We are over 3 billion strong and we're dedicated to documenting ourselves in ever greater detail. Why?

We have become our own Big Brother. The hoarding of information about ourselves in an attempt to improve our performance, inspired by the Quantified Self movement, is only the tip of the iceberg. It doesn't explain the obsessive dedication with which we, even post-Snowden, share intimate details about ourselves to an often not too clearly defined group of others. What possesses us? We connect, trying to avoid social exclusion, but there's more to it. In Together Alone, Sherry Turkle explains how social media allow us to present an ideal version of ourselves, to have the illusion of companionship without the demands of friendship. We don't feel like we're interacting with algorithms tuned to specific business models, we are simply being social.

There is more to our relation with data. In Requiem for a Species, Clive Hamilton describes how our individual sense of self has become bound up with how we consume, how our desires to buy products grow out of the need to find and express a sense of self. Since it is impossible to find an authentic identity in products, there is a constant dissatisfaction leading to more spending - the perfect formula for economic growth. The resulting over-consumption has led to strange things: from home organizers who help us feel less oppressed by our belongings, to shopping now perceived as leisure. Advertisement has married consumption to self-completion, and the Internet is the promised land where the seekers can express, and search for, their authentic self.

The more information you broadcast about yourself the better the advertisement companies can provide you with a mirror of this ideal self, a much needed confirmation while at the same time a trigger to consume more. Our houses are bursting at the seams, our data bodies morbidly obese. Metaphors like the cloud promise infinite liposuction, delegating the storage of our excesses to what seems like outer space not unlike our attics and self-storage boxes hide the excesses of our material consumerism. What are we so hungry to save? What do we want to transmit to the future?

In the end, we can only speculate on what might prove valuable in a hundred years from now. From the perspective of a hot and iceless planet, no longer facing disasters but living them, our cloud might tell a different story than we'd imagine. Our connected and information hungry lifestyles are leaving behind more than the noise we generate while socializing with the technology we surround ourselves with. Our seemingly immaterial legacy has a physical impact. It requires massive data centers filled with energy hungry, heat producing servers. Each and every storage device in each and every server rack in need of replacement when it starts to falter. Every thing we use to connect to it will be replaced because of a desire for the latest model, or because it was built to break.

The physical nature of digital information is neatly hidden. Most of it is exported to the less privileged parts of the world, where labor is cheap, and where there is limited regulatory oversight into health, safety and environmental impact. The export of e-waste has resulted in extreme pollution with serious negative impact on the health of locals in for instance Ghana and China. Mining for the minerals needed to produce the devices hosting our data is leading to ecocide and slavery in areas of conflict in Africa and extreme pollution in China. The factories that produce our tech, such as the ones owned by the Taiwanese Foxconn, provide their workers with tiny wages and very poor working conditions. Only now that regulations are getting more strict, and because we're running out of certain metals and mining them becomes increasingly costly, have we begun to recycle a tiny amount of old hardware in the developed world, perhaps slightly diminishing pollution elsewhere but keeping the economic inequality intact.

Cerf warns us about the possible eradication of our history, but future generations don't need access to our data in order to write our story. Surveillance capitalism is leaving much deeper traces than those left on the magnetic film of our hard disks.

Changes

Lidia Pereira

Immaterial?

Back in 2014, when I first conceived of the Immaterial Labour Union, I was strongly influenced by the ideas put forward by Mirko Tobias Schäfer's book "Bastard Culture!", more explicitly Chapter 2 "Claiming Participation", as well as Tiziana Terranova's essay "Free Labor: Producing Culture for the Digital Economy". The latter was especially influential in my choice to undertake this project. In it, Terranova sketches the instrumental relevance of free labor in achieving higher profit rates within the context of late capitalist societies, focusing its critique on digital economy particularly. Anchoring her exposure on Lazzarato's notion of 'immaterial labour', where the 'social' directly identifies with the 'economical' (Lazzarato 1997), Terranova's characterisation of digital economy expands and grounds cyberutopian views by adopting an historically rooted systemic reading:

"This essay describes the digital economy as a specific mechanism of internal "capture" of larger pools of social and cultural knowledge. The digital economy is an important area of experimentation with value and free cultural/affective labor. It is about specific forms of production (Web design, multimedia production, digital services, and so on), but is also about forms of labor we do not immediately recognize as such: chat, real-life stories, mailing lists, amateur newsletters, and so on." (Terranova 2000, 38)

Thus, by mapping the development of digital economy alongside late capitalist societies' focus on knowledge work as a source of surplus, Terranova is able to escape the confusion brought about by the blurring lines between production and consumption to highlight the still alienated character of labour within cyberspace (Terranova 2000).

It was based on this historical grounding of the term coined in 1997 by Maurizio Lazzarato, as well as its transposition to the cyberspace, that I named the project "Immaterial Labour Union", focusing precisely on the forms of labour we might not recognise as such, more specifically the labour performed by users of corporate social networking platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Google, Instagram, etc.

In the year of 2015, days before the launch of the first issue of the zine, a debate took place in the project's mailing list which questioned the adequacy of the project's name. One of the arguments, posited by Professor Christian Fuchs, presented a philosophical opposition to the term 'immaterial labour', "because all the world and all activity is material".

It makes sense to analyse this objection in line with what Christian Fuchs defines as the International Division of Digital Labour (Fuchs 2015), comprised of all the different phases in the production, circulation and consumption of computers, mobile phones and other devices. These include, among others, slavery in mineral extractions in Congo, Taylorist production lines in Shenzhen, software engineering, call centre services and prosumerism. Thus, according to Fuchs, the International Division of Digital Labour is proof that historical modes of production, such as feudalism, slavery and capitalism, interact dialectically and form a network of highly exploited labour which ultimately creates profits for the ICT industry (Fuchs 2015). This should sufficiently prove that information work encompasses both physical and non-physical qualities (Fuchs 2016).

Ursula Huws shares a similar point of view as regards the belonging of digital labour to a network of activity that grows complex, fragmented and geographically dispersed (Huws 2014). In Huws's conception, there is no 'immaterial' or 'weightless' economy, and the growth in usage of such terms serves only to detach and hide the material reality of both the physical infrastructure of the Internet (e.g.: data centers, cables, satellites, etc) and the manufacturing of material commodities (e.g.: computers, laptops, mobile phones, etc).

Nick Dyer-Witheford's "Cyber-Proletariat: Global Labour in the Digital Vortex" takes us deeper in the very material, revolting and environmentally degrading realities of the International

Division of Digital Labour. With Dyer-Witthford we travel from Ciudad Juárez, in Mexico, where since the 1970's US industries, such as HP, Dell and Cisco, have settled so as to take advantage of poor local working conditions and lack of labour regulations, a situation further advanced by the North America Free Trade Agreement of 1994, up to China, where transnational corporations account for 85% of all hi-tech exports, the most well-known being Foxconn, most famously subcontracted by Apple, and where production occurs under inhuman working conditions with 11 hours a day, 6 days a week, low wages and poor safety standards being the norm. Among other locations, we also 'visit' the Amazon and the Congo, where mining, a key industry behind hi-tech production, wreaks havoc on both environment and people's fundamental rights.

As regards the physical infrastructure of the Internet, Dale Lately's piece for The Baffler "Silicon Valley's Cult of Nothing" illustrates how the immaterial and very fluffy 'Cloud' is powered by coal, as the digital economy makes use of 10% of the world's total electricity generation. This 'cult of immaterialism' (Lately 2015) in fact only serves to hide the unpleasant reality of sweatshop labour, environmental destruction and, at times, even slavery. Indeed, "Immaterial Labour Union" was a problematic name as it, once more, obscured the material realities behind and around digital labour. However, the lack of time to consider a better alternative, allied with a need to prioritize my editorial functions within the zine, have postponed the solving of this pressing issue up until now. Hence, this issue serves the double purpose of highlighting the problematic assumptions carried on by the usage of the term "immaterial labour", as well as announcing the name change from "Immaterial Labour Union" to "Pervasive Labour Union".

Pervasive?

The introduction of the scientific management of labour by Frederick Taylor in the 1880's sought to improve efficiency and productivity through the application of scientific principles to labour processes. Taylor's approach found echo even within some groups in the Soviet Union, with Alexei Gastev setting up the Central Institute of Labour with the final goal of optimizing labour processes to such an extent that the worker would become one with the machine. According to Nikolas Rose, Taylorism "accorded a visibility to previously obscure and unimportant aspects of the activities of persons, (...) calibrating and

governing these minutiae of existence in accordance with these norms - of hygiene, of intelligence and so forth" (Rose, 1999). However, Taylorism's insufficient attention to the psychological wellbeing of the workers proved counterproductive, and a new school of managerial theory gained prominence which saw workers' psychological welfare as central in achieving higher economic efficiency. Throughout the 20th century, employment 'was to be situated within a wider network of relations between the worker, the employer and the state' (Rose, 1999), furthering the subsumption of the former's subjectivity to economical goals.

Today, smart urbanism, the Internet of Things, self-tracking and self-quantification devices, productivity apps etc, promise a more efficient and productive way of life by means of data collection, management, visualization and analysis. In much the same way that data collection, management, visualization and analysis allowed us to become unpaid workers for corporate social networking platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, Twitter and Google, whose profits derive from user data being sold to third party advertisers, these continuous developments are promising to submerge us in a state of pervasive labour. Within this context the union will continue to focus on "forms of labor we do not immediately recognize as such" (Terranova 2000), hopefully going beyond the surface of the "immaterial" and addressing such issues as, among others, the international division of labour, cybernetic governance and databased predictability.

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